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DIME NOVELS



THE CRESTED SERPENT.

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Beadle's Dime Novels, No. 301,

To issue Tuesday, February 10th, will be

MUSTANG SAM ;
OR,
THE MAD RIDER OF THE PLAINS.
A Romance of Apache Land.


BY **JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,**
AUTHOR OF "THE LONE CHIEF," "MOUNTAIN KATE," ETC.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,

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THE

J. Joseph Desires

CRESTED SERPENT;

Nettie Desires

OR,

Sally Desires

THE WHITE TIGER OF THE TROPICS.

Rosa Desires

BY JOHN EMERALD.

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THE

CRESTED SERPENT.

CHAPTER I.

THE COILS OF THE SERPENT.

AMONG the mountain passes of Mexico and in her fruitful lowlands is this story laid, during the short reign of Maximilian.

Between Queretaro and Tula, north of the city of Mexico, in a valley like the crescent moon, that horns in a spur of one of the innumerable mountain ranges belonging to the Sierra Madre, is the hacienda Santa Luzia, nestling in a labyrinth of oaks, mesquite, magnolia and palm-trees, and surrounded by a broad prairie, and guarded in the west by the slanting mountain-peak, that, although two leagues away, seems to overhang it as a grim giant sentinel; and in the east is the rancho and its innumerable adobe houses and wooden cattle-pens, presided over by the noisy and dark-visaged vacqueros. The hacienda is built of rough stone, and fronted by a wooden veranda, around the slender pillars of which vines twine upward in tender intimacy, overlap the stone wall, and trail across the flat roof that covers the building.

The hacienda Santa Luzia is owned by Senor Jose Vallejo, in violent opposition to Maximilian, although of pure Castilian extraction.

It was a delightful day in the latter part of September, when the heat was tempered by the cool breezes that descended from the mountain peaks which ribbed the land, or from the valleys that lay in the distance, as basins to mighty streams, that Jose Vallejo stood upon the veranda of Santa Luzia, with his tall and beautiful daughter leaning upon his arm.

"Father, you must not go. I entreat you," and she raised her head from his shoulder and gazed entreatingly into his dark eyes.

"Daughter, ten hours ago I would have looked upon it as dangerous—but not now. He brought with him from France the title of the White Tiger of the Tropics, and well has he sustained it. He has been our most inveterate and relentless foe. To-day his regiment of tigers are encamped on the plateau of that mountain-peak. He could have swept down on us, hung us to these oaks, and laid our hacienda and rancho in ashes. Instead of that he has sent his favorite riding-horse as a present, and invites me to his camp, proffering the courier as a guide."

"Has he not proved treacherous before?"

"But was he ever known before to make such a princely present to an enemy?" and Jose Vallejo waved his hand in the direction of a horse that stood before him fully caparisoned. "This is his war-horse—one, it is said, he values above his other steeds."

It was a noble-looking animal, and as he stood before them his bay hide shone like satin. Fully sixteen hands high, he bore all the marks of mettle and endurance. A bridle made of hair, and ornamented with gold and silver, traced his forelock, nether jaw and cheek; and a martingale, veined with gold and silver threads, was fastened to the reins by silver rings; a golden coronet flashed upon his broad breast. Upon his back rested a saddle, the pommel of which was round and broad as two hands, and rimmed with chased silver; and in the center shone a golden tiger in the act of springing upon its prey. The stirrups were wide and almost square, made of solid silver; the leathers were covered with exquisite figures; the rim of the saddle, from bow to back, was rimmed with gold; the saddle-cloth was woven from material of the finest texture, and the broad hair girth was streaked with white and yellow threads of silver and gold. Over the saddle front protruded from holsters two six-shooters mounted with gold, and in their butts diamond stones sparkled in the September sun.

"One who makes such a gift as this must be sincere. How could he be otherwise? I will go instantly to his camp."

"Again, father, I ask you to beware of this man. It is a present of immense value. You are a patriot, and he is an enemy to our country," said the daughter of Vallejo.

"Farewell, dear daughter," and he leaned forward and kissed her brow. "Before the sun is hid behind the mountain, I will return," and he walked to where the superb animal, with its wealthy trappings, stood awaiting him.

Arranging the stirrup-straps, he leaped into the saddle, and motioned the guide to take the lead.

Senorita Paula Vallejo stood looking at her father, as he rode toward the mountain. She was tall, slender and graceful in her bearing; eyes intensely black and margined with heavy eyelashes, surmounted with a broad, white forehead, relieved by heavy, delicate eyebrows, that seemed penciled upon their polished surface. Her complexion was of the pure Castilian white, face oval, and a chin square and marked with a slight dimple; and her raven tresses were looped and fastened with fastidious care, showing a neck that sloped in a grand curve to shoulders of perfect mold.

"Humfredo!" she called, in a loud tone.

"Senorita!" and a Mexican youth, dressed in leather breeches and jacket, presented himself.

"See, there is your master. He goes to the camp of the White Tiger of the Tropics!"

"Caramba!"

"The camp is on the plateau on the mountain. Follow on foot; make your way to the camp and witness what takes place. Quick!"

"Senorita, I know two secret passes to the mountain-top. The other two are guarded by the Tigers, if encamped there."

"Take this pistol."

He accepted the proffered weapon, and with a fleet, swinging step, went in pursuit of Jose Vallejo and the Mexican guide, sent by the Maximilian colonel, who was camping on the mountain plateau.

We will now enter the temporary abode of the White Tiger of the Tropics.

On a plateau that slanted down in a gentle sweep, almost to a sharp point, was an encampment of imperial troops—Mexicans, French and Austrians—all the predominating ele-

ments that characterized the imperial army during the reign of Napoleon's victim. On the front of the plateau, commanding a view of Jose Vallejo's hacienda, that lay bathed in the mellow sunshine, and the valleys stretching on either side of the mountain-spur, was a marquee, circled with ropes. In the doorway, or raised flap, trimmed with crimson, yellow and purple cloths and cords, stood a man with hair as white as snow, but whose face denoted a man of not more than forty years. His eyes were black and piercing, and complexion sallow, hight almost six feet, with a form muscular and graceful.

He shaded his eyes with his left hand and looked in the direction of Vallejo's hacienda, saying to some one inside the tent:

"He cannot resist the temptation. The bait is too powerful. I have caught them all but this fine Mexican gentleman, and all have died with ropes around their necks. I would have let this one go, but you set the trap, and he is your victim. It is for the good of his imperial highness," he said, sneeringly, "and perhaps for our own good in the future," and he looked away in the distance, and a cold smile stole over his sallow face.

A woman's voice, rich, soft, and languid, came from the inside of the tent.

"He must die, Arnaud. These rich Mexicans who oppose the empire now will oppose us."

"He comes; he comes, Murieta! The hook was well baited. We must give him a reception worthy our exalted position," and he laughed a low, bitter laugh. "Come, Murieta, and see our victim on the gilded hook. I would not give my blooded horse for a thousand Mexican curs."

A woman came from the tent. She was a woman of medium hight, features brown, of the Arabic cast, and faultlessly perfect in contour; hair intensely black, and eyes a dark red, almond-shaped, and seeming to hide beneath their heavy lashes smothered lightning. A hand, delicate and brown, shaded her eyes as she looked across the valley, and upon a finger of it was a ring representing a serpent, its jaws expanded and fangs of diamond ready to sink into a victim, eyes of ruby, and surmounted with a diamond edging.

As she saw the advance of Jose Vallejo, a darker shade overcast her brown face, and a rippling, soft, musical laugh came from between her small, white teeth, as she sneeringly said :

“ Rich, yet entrapped by that which can purchase a crown. Senor Jose Vallejo, you shall now remember the slight your daughter put upon me in the city of Mexico. Her proud Castilian blood caused her to slight the Arab woman, the daughter of a Sheik, and the wife of the White Tiger of the Tropics.”

Back of the marquee, in their encampment, were the Tigers, under the trees and tall bocage, engaged in various occupations ; but a strong guard patrolled between them and the marquee, and on the edge of the outlet, just wide enough to admit of the passage of a horse, stood a guard ; and further down, hid among the rocks and cactus, were others, scanning the valleys below with the practiced eyes of soldiers.

Jose Vallejo soon arrived at the outpost. No countersign was given by him or his guide, but on all sides guards brought their pieces to a present arms. His vanity was aroused ; and, although a man of keen sense and finished education, he fell into a fatal trap, and was lured to his destruction by a gaudy bait. Arriving at the pass, he rode with confidence after his guide until he reached the plateau.

Arnaud Boussard, with a smile upon his sallow face, and a meaning light in his eyes, advanced toward him, extending his hand.

“ Welcome, Senor Vallejo ! Dismount and enter the marquee. My wife, Murieta Boussard. You remember her.”

Vallejo bowed low ; but when his eyes rested upon the brown face of Murieta, and he saw the fiery expression of her eyes, strange misgivings entered his mind, and he wished himself back in his hacienda. What Murieta then thought of, his mind was fast revolving. It was of a slight put upon the unforgiving Arab woman by his haughty daughter, Paula Vallejo.

“ Senor Vallejo, we have been enemies ; but I, to-day, extended the hand of amity, while I had you, your daughter, and hacienda in my power.”

“ Yes, Senor Boussard ; I accept the princely present—you

have made me the same as I would a sacred vow of friendship from one whom I had deemed my deadly enemy."

"You will not be deceived, Senor Vallejo," softly remarked Murieta, the Arab woman, and again a darker hue overspread her face. "The White Tiger of the Tropics," and she laughed a liquid ripple at the name she had conjured up, "is as tender as a child, and he desires your friendship."

"Senora, he has won that already," replied Vallejo, as he reclined on oriental cushions, and sipped wine until his heart warmed to a passionate glow.

Murieta, with all her Arabic cunning and art, played with nimble fingers upon the harp, and sung for him songs that had been taught her on the great sandy desert between the Arabian and the Red seas; sung with such pathos that his senses became bewildered, and he almost imagined he had been transported to the sandy plains of Danah.

Where was Humfredo? He lay crouched in a ledge of rocks that reared themselves at the end of the mountain spur, and from there saw preparations that caused his heart to quake.

A tall, slender tree was bent down, and from its end dangled a rope. It formed an arbor, but it was the arbor that hid the asp.

The folds of the tent opened, and his master, Jose Vallejo, the Arab woman, and Boussard, came forth. Vallejo mounted his horse that stood ready to receive him, and as the sun shone upon his smiling face and the richly-costumed horse, it was a picture irresistible in its beauty.

"One more glass, Senor Vallejo," said the Arab woman, and she poured one full of the sparkling beverage, and with hat off he raised it to his lips and drank to his host and hostess, and wished them a long and happy existence.

Pouring a glass full of wine, Murieta raised it to her lips, her eyes resembling the red embers of a dying fire, and drank :

"The dynasty and thy proud daughter, Señor Jose Vallejo."

He was fascinated. The gaze of the serpent was upon him, and its coil was hovering over his head, ready to envelop his Castilian neck in its deadly folds.

CHAPTER II.

THE SECRETS OF THE MOUNTAIN CAVERN.

THE coil of the serpent did descend and encircle the neck of Jose Vallejo, and like the quick light of a mirror in the sun's rays, the tree sprung up into the air, dragging with it the writhing form of Vallejo, and the high-spirited horse, from the back of which he was flung into eternity, reared and plunged with nostrils distended and eyes dilated.

"Murieta," said Arnaud, "this is the last. One more added to the long roll of our victims."

She still held the wine-glass in her hand. Throwing it over the rocks on the edge of the mountain spur, she said in tones full of venom:

"He drank from that. I will shatter it. Now, Arnaud, let us work for the grand achievement of our lives. We have riches that are almost fabulous, and when we can not buy, we will kill."

"Yes," said Boussard, "lives shall not stand in our way. Revolutions in this country are but the work of a day, and those who gain power do not know how to use it. Let me but once grasp it, and I will rally around such men as will hold it though the rivers run blood. Throw that carrion down the mountain side," pointing to the pulseless form of Vallejo, saying which he strode into the marquee with Murieta following after.

And who was this bloody-handed man, fitly named a tiger?

Who was this woman—fit mate for the human tiger?

A few words will tell.

Boussard having served in the French army in Algeria had wooed and won a Sheik's daughter, and, with the wild Bedouin had led a very wild life.

All the tribes at enmity with that to which Boussard had attached himself, had felt his heavy hand. Wherever his sword flashed in the fray he fought with the ferocity that could not be overcome, and led his Arab followers into the

fight with a speed and daring that caused him to be known through all the desert region, and of Arabia. His hair turned from a deep black to a snowy white, yet his face retained its youthfulness, and his eyes their look of intense black. From the appellation of the The Tiger of the Tropics, the prefix "white" was attached, owing to his white hair, and ever after the title of The White Tiger of the Tropics clung to him. Murieta, his Arab wife, lost all of her girlish gentleness as she matured and budded into womanhood, and the bold spirit of her husband took possession of her.

Boussard's relatives in France having at length heard of his whereabouts from travelers who had visited the East, interceded with Napoleon, and Arnaud Boussard was recalled to Paris. Murieta and Boussard took leave of the aged Sheik, who shed tears of grief at their departure, and reached Paris when Napoleon was making preparations for the invasion of Mexico, which command was intrusted to Marshal Bazaine. In Arnaud Boussard, Napoleon saw a useful man, proffered him command of a regiment of cavalry, which he accepted, and in company with Murieta, his Arabian wife, embarked for Mexico, where he, owing to his savage, cold cruelty, still retained the Arabian title of The White Tiger of the Tropics.

On the spur of the Sierra Madre mountain he held the outpost of the imperial army, and kept up a guerrilla warfare, or murdered savagely and relentlessly, all prominent Mexicans who were opposed to the Maximillian empire. Napoleon had withdrawn his forces from Mexican soil, yet such Frenchmen as Boussard, who loved excitement and adventure, remained with the army of Maximilian.

A form was gliding down the mountain side. It was Humfredo. Drops of perspiration stood upon his pallid forehead. With the speed of a racer he fled to the hacienda, and as he leaped over deep chasms formed by rains from the mountain, he would groan aloud in his bitterness. He had stood idly by and witnessed the murder of his master, who had reared him from childhood. Soon he arrived at the hacienda, and standing at the hedge gateway, under the shade of a palm-tree, was Paula Vallejo. She saw terror depicted in Humfredo's face, and exclaimed :

"Oh, God! they have murdered my father!"

The Mexican boy stood silently by her side. He could not articulate one word. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth.

"Paula Vallejo, be a woman," hissed the pale girl between her teeth. "You are now left alone in the world. No mother, no father." She stepped to the silent youth and clenched him by the hand. "How was the deed done? Tell me—tell me!" and a look of fierceness shot from her eyes.

He told her in broken accents, what he had witnessed; how the rope had been dropped about his neck, and his writhing body hurled into the air just as he was bidding them adieu before returning to his daughter.

"This is the goblet they drank the wine from," said Humfredo. "I caught it as the tigress flung it over the rocks."

"Humfredo!"

"Senorita?"

"Will you be true to me?"

"I will, as I believe in God and hope for his mercy."

"Come."

They entered the house. She took wine and filled the delicate goblet.

"Swear that you will assist me to visit upon these demons a retribution that will be terrible to contemplate; that you will follow me unswervingly and with fidelity; and that you will not rest until our revenge is accomplished."

"I swear it by the Aztec blood that courses my veins; by the rites of my ancestors; and by the love I bore my master, Jose Vallejo."

"Drink."

He drank the contents of the goblet, and she shattered it upon the floor, and its hundreds of delicate fragments lay reflected in the sun that peered over the mountain-top, and fell with a mellow, tender light into the room where the bereaved maiden and the descendant of the Aztecs stood meditating their revenge.

The sun ceased to cast her light upon the earth; the fragrant breezes from the south kissed the brow of Paula Vallejo as she stood in front of the hacienda, surrounded by a silent group of her father's Mexican attendants; the constel-

lations in the heavens commenced to unfold their beauties, and the darkness of night was robing the mountain and valleys in its embrace.

"Now," said the subdued voice of Paula, and six men, headed by Humfredo, were soon lost in the darkness.

Far off was an old mission. Its bell was ringing the hour of twelve, when the group of men returned through the gloom of the night, bearing the body of Jose Vallejo.

All that night there was wailing throughout the hacienda, and the wolf of the prairie howled a requiem in return. Paula sat like a statue, her pale features beautiful in their grief, bearing strange contrast to her dark clothes and the dismal surroundings. No tears dimmed her eyes. Her heart was seared, and engraven on it in characters of blood was the word—REVENGE.

When day came in its resplendent beauty, Jose Vallejo's body was quietly committed to earth, and the clods of the valley forever covered his inanimate form.

After the burial of her father, Paula for hours meditated over what had come between her and happiness. The impenetrable future was before her. She knew that from that hour her life would be one that men of iron nerves would recoil from, full of dangers and constant peril—yet the knowledge of the awful death her father met kept in flame the burning fires of hatred.

"Humfredo," she said, and the Mexican boy stood before her; "we must leave this hacienda to-morrow. You know the secret passes to the mountain-tops?"

"Every one of them."

"Is there a secret retreat—a cave near the camp of these monsters who murdered your master?"

Humfredo hesitated; a flush overspread his brown face; then with energy he said:—

"I have sworn to assist you in your revenge, and I will tell you all. Two leagues from the camp of the White Tiger of the Tropics is a subterranean passageway, that leads up to the mountain-top. Inside the mountain is a cave or chamber, in which we descendants of the Aztecs hold our ancient rites. The passageway is the key to its entrance. My aged mother, who loved your father as she loves me, is the priestess, and

presides over the ceremonies. Twice a year the Aztecs assemble in the mountain cave and receive from her the blessings that are transmitted from our deities, enjoy the sacred rites that were observed by our ancestors, whose bones rest in almost every mountain cave in Mexico; then return to their abodes in the north, the south, the east, and in the west. My mother is now weeping for Senor Vallejo, and she mutters of revenge. We will tell her of our determination—our vow, and call her strong aid to assist in destroying the Arab woman, Arnaud Boussard, and the Tigers."

"We will. Call your mother."

A woman of at least sixty years entered the room. Her body was tall and straight, eyes of an intense blue, and hair hanging in thick, white folds. She had been weeping.

"Marta," spoke Paula, "we have been deeply wronged."

"Deeply, senorita," and the voice sounded tremulous and sad.

"Is not revenge sweet?"

"Ay, Paula," and the large blue eyes looked inquiringly at the speaker.

"Will you assist Humfredo, and Paula, whom you have been a mother to, to revenge the death of my father and your master?"

"Our creed teaches revenge. Tell me my duty and I will perform it."

"The cave in the mountain, Marta?"

"Humfredo has told you?"

"Yes."

"Paula, you must become one of us. Yours is the blood of the Castilian; ours that of the Aztec. Will you become a daughter of the Aztecs?"

"I will, any thing to have my revenge—deep and terrible—on the murderers of my father. Yes, I will become a daughter of the Aztecs."

"We will visit the cave to-night, and you shall learn its mysteries; but no mortal foot has trod its sacred floors unless the blood of the Aztecs coursed their veins."

Again the old mission bell, in low, silvery tones, announced the hour of twelve. On the mountain peak glimmered a solitary light, telling where the Tigers and the Arab woman

rested in repose, and away to the west the mountain spur loomed up and extended its dark front northward as far as the vision of the eye could reach. It was a formidable fastness. From the narrow point, for leagues, on either side, towering rocks hemmed in the mountain as grim battlements around a feudal castle of the olden time. Two leagues from the 'Tigers' camp it swelled to the east, and monster rocks, as if an upheaval had left its trace from mediæval days, lay around, moss-covered and grim; and from the rude center it feathered down to a point in the north, as in the south, and a deep pass came between it and a sister-chain, whose rocky and tree-covered top trailed its length on to the Sierra Madre as a huge serpent.

Humfredo, Paula and Marta, muffled in cloaks and blankets, emerged from the hacienda as the mission bell ceased ringing, and mounting horses, followed a narrow path that led to the mountain side.

The night was clear, and the air bracing. Rapidly they rode in the direction of the cloud-like pile, and soon reached the undergrowth of chaparral and cactus that grew heavily on the swells of ground at the mountain's base.

Dismounting, they fastened their horses securely to *mesquite* trees, and commenced an ascent toward the base rocks. In single file, silently, they approached them until they stood before a barrier not made by human hands. All around the small semicircle where they stood, clustered densely the *mesquite*, the stunted oak, the chaparral, and the cactus; and fronting them was the mountain base, with a small aperture at least ten feet up the rocks.

"This is the entrance, Senorita Paula," said Humfredo, and he pressed his hand upon the rock, and an opening, large, enough to admit the form of a man, presented itself. "Enter."

They entered. The slab moved silently back, and yet the stars shone from the hole above. Lighting a small wax taper, a high, narrow passage extended upward. A cool draught of air pervaded the passage. Occasionally a spacious chamber would be entered, then rude paths, in spiral shape, wound upward and upward. At length a barrier interposed. A touch upon the rock; it moved, and a chamber, broad and spacious, presented itself.

"We are in the Aztec chapel," said Marta. "Here my authority is supreme. All those of Aztec blood bow their knees at my command. Marta is the High Priestess."

Her voice was solemn and sad, and her old form as erect as though the mantle of youth had dropped upon it.

One by one lights from waxen tapers emitted their mild, ethereal rays, and a scene grand to contemplate lay before Paula Vallejo. It was a chamber resembling in shape a horse-shoe, with terrace upon terrace in the curve. It gleamed and flashed like a concave mirror, and from the dome, hung, as icicles, long, slender, crystallized stone, that sparkled as precious gems under the light of the waxen tapers.

They stood upon a terrace formed of crystals, and below them, at least ten feet, in a circle, was a chamber, that glittered and glowed with amethystine and sapphirine brilliancy.

Hamfredo disappeared from view, and in a few minutes emerged upon the other side, on an altar formed of crystallized rock. There was an instantaneous flash of light, and the altar appeared eloquently radiant. Soon he returned, and Marta disappeared from view, again to appear on the altar robed in spotless white; and upon her silver locks rested a crown of gold.

"Paula Vallejo, descend into the chamber below. Thence you will go a daughter of the Aztecs." The magic touch again opened a passage, and she stood alone in the chamber, and above her Marta, the high priestess of the fading Aztecs. Before her, in an earthen bowl, burned a fire that emitted a blue light, and a smoke arose to the dome of the vaulted cavern. Around it Marta waved a wand of serpent shape, while from her lips escaped an unintelligible language.

"Kneel, Paula Vallejo!"

Paula, pale as marble, and with compressed lips, knelt upon the flinty floor, and with awe she gazed toward Marta, the old Mexican woman.

"You are in the chamber of the Crested Serpent of the Aztecs. Shudder not. Far north, in the ruins left by our people, its shape is carved upon their temples and their altars, and the crest is symbolical of the former power and strength of the race that has faded away as mists before the

sun. The Aztec eagle, in its southward flight, when our people wandered as the Israelites, carried it in its talons to where Mexico now rears its temples and strong walls, and nestling in the serpent's folds it died. From its dust arose the city of the Montezumas, the splendors of which were never dimmed until the Spaniards came like locusts, ate up the vitality of the Aztec, and absorbed their blood. Yet, the Crested Serpent lives, the Aztec rites survive, and the blood of the Montezuma is running in our veins. Will you become one of us, and bow to the Crested Serpent that is as strong as bands of steel, and the bite of which is as poisonous as that of the *cobra capello*? Answer, Paula Vallejo."

"I do," she murmured faintly.

"Drink wine, typical of the blood of our race."

Humfredo handed her a goblet, and she drank.

"One more ordeal and you are bound to us in Aztec blood, and we are sworn to support, defend and guard you. Be courageous and fear not, and keep your eyes upon the altar."

Low, solemn music, as if from the bowels of the earth, rolled and trembled in the chamber. A panel slipped back, and a serpent, with a crest upon his head, looked down upon the kneeling figure of Paula Vallejo. Its eyes shone with a white sheen, and it waved its head to and fro, as if keeping time to the music that trembled and rolled in solemn tones through the chamber of supernatural light. It glided down from the aperture, and its sides flashed with all the colors that adorn the reflections of the sun from the icy crags in the polar seas.

CHAPTER III.

THE TALISMAN AND THE BIVOUAC.

PAULA VALLEJO maintained her position before the high priestess of the Aztecs. She knew that a terrible ordeal would be presented to her, and steeled herself to meet it.

The serpent reared its head, and its long form circled in a

graceful swell as the music rose in lofty grandeur, and sunk in trembling cadence. At length it folded itself around the Mexican maiden, and its dazzling eyes looked into hers. She uttered an exclamation of terror and closed her sight from the hideous view.

"Courage, daughter!" came from the priestess, Marta.

She felt the serpent around her form and shuddered with fear. The music changed. It grew sonorous and wild, and increased in volume, and raved as the sea when lashed to fury. The serpent unwound from Paula Vallejo, and glided back into the aperture.

With a moan, Paula Vallejo sunk to the stone floor. Humfredo, who had been in an inner chamber, and Marta, sprung to her side, raised her now insensible body and bore it from the parterre to the terrace above. She opened her eyes, and, trembling with dread, asked:

"Humfredo, was it all a dream—the solemn music and the dreadful serpent?"

"It was no dream. You saw the serpent of the Aztecs."

Marta kneeling down took Paula's hand, saying:

"Paula, you are now a daughter of the Aztecs. The folds of the Crested Serpent have been around your body, and you yet live. You are now one of our race. In this serpent you behold the instrument of our revenge. Its bite is deadly and its fold fatal when aroused to action. The music that had such a wonderful effect upon it has power to control its movements."

The visible terror that affected Paula left her, and she thought of the serpent and its deadly bite and cried.

"Is there an outlet above?" she asked of Marta.

"There is. Let us ascend."

The lights were extinguished by Humfredo, and through narrow, winding passages they ascended, until the passage stopped abruptly. Humfredo applied his strength to what seemed a huge boulder that lay in a hollow. It rolled back, and above them were trees, and through their branches the stars could be discerned. All around were massive rocks covered with the mosses and vines of years.

"There is no passage here for a man on horseback," said Humfredo. "The road through the mountain is one league

to the west of this spot. Only narrow trails among the rocks lead thence. The stone I moved back is so evenly balanced that your strength, Senorita Paula, is sufficient to raise it, and it adjusts itself. These Tigers are encamped two leagues that way," and he pointed to the southern end of the spur.

One hour from that time they were out on the prairie, *en route* to the hacienda, which they reached as gray streaks were flaring up in the east.

"Marta, Humfredo and myself must enter the camp of our enemies. When there we will communicate with you in the cave."

"Your plan is good, daughter; but how will you escape detection?"

"By dressing in man's attire. I am tall, can stain my face and hands to a brown color, cut off these long black tresses, mount my horse, and will then be beyond recognition."

"The White Tiger is cunning, and he would not receive you unless you went to him indorsed by adherents of the new empire."

"True, I must see to that."

"Paula, the army of Maximilian has in its ranks many of our Aztec blood—those who never dispute the rights of Marta, the high priestess. One, now in the city of Mexico, Ramon Mendez, a friend to the Tiger, is a prominent General in the enemy's service."

She took a ring from her finger and handed it to Paula.

"This ring, if you have an interview with him, will insure you whatever you ask, be it in his power to grant it."

As she placed the ring upon Paula's finger, she touched a secret spring, and from its top the head of a crested serpent sprung out. Only a few seconds its head remained exposed, then disappeared from view.

That evening saw Paula Vallejo costumed in male attire—her hair cut short, and face stained to a deep brown; and as the darkness of night set in, she and Humfredo bade Marta adios, and took their way southward of the camp of the Tigers in the direction of the city of Mexico. As they skirted the mountain-spur, music from Marieta's harp, and her voice in an Arabic accompaniment, could be distinctly heard in the distance.

"Senorita, the music you hear is from the encampment of the Tigers."

"Whose hands play upon the strings of the harp?"

"The hands of the Tiger's wife."

"Her death-dirge must be music wilder than that. It must be strong and wild, as if the eternal hills had burst forth in wild refrains."

"It shall be, Senorita Paula."

"Can music, with all its subtle charms, find a responsive echo in the heart of this cruel, relentless woman of Arabia? God endows the human family with these gifts, as he gives to the artist the power and infinite genius to paint the golden halo that rings our Redeemer's brow. The impassioned eloquence of song has caused strong men to weep—to go into battle as though their divinity rested upon the cannon of their enemies, and to raise their voices in praise to the God whose name they had profaned. The poet paints the word, but the genius of music immortalizes it, as it rises tremblingly, as on the wings of a bird, up into the tall spires of pillared cathedrals, and takes living form among the angels that are there to bear it whence it came. How is it that from this valley I hear in the mountain the voice of the murderer of my father, almost weeping in the pathos of a song? It is a mockery, and the tongue of the Tigress that gives volume to the inspiration of some child of song, should wither before it pollutes the pure air of the mountain."

"Mexico is cursed with many such strangers as the Arabian woman and her husband. It is our duty to our country to destroy them," said Humfredo, as Paula ended her apparent soliloquy.

"And we will destroy them, Humfredo. From now until this land of ours is no longer desecrated by the footsteps of these invaders and usurpers, I devote my life and fortune to my country's service—for love of country and for revenge."

They were riding away from the mountain-spur, and had entered upon a broad and level prairie. Their steel spurs jingled in concert with the movements of their spirited horses, and they rode on until the Pleiades shone from the sky with an ethereal sheen.

They had passed the prairie and were entering a strip of

timber—stunted oak growing in a sandy waste—when suddenly a sharp challenge rung out in Spanish.

“Friends!” said Humfredo.

They were ordered to advance, and riding forward, were confronted by six brigandish-looking Mexicans.

“Take them to the camp,” was ordered in a gruff tone, in broken Spanish, denoting the speaker to be an American.

A guard of three mounted their horses and silently left the road, and traveled through the oaks at least one-half mile, when they reached a place that fell away in a slope into a chaparral. Again they were challenged, then ordered to advance, and soon red embers of at least ten fires presented themselves in a broad circle; and as the gusts of the morning would cause them to flare up in fitful flashes, forms of men, wrapt in slumber, could be seen lying around. They were conducted to the commander of the troop, who hastily arose, exclaiming:

“Prisoners? Good; we will now gain information. Guard them well until daybreak.”

Paula and Humfredo were fatigued after their night’s ride, and tethering their animals, they lay down to slumber, and soon tired nature succumbed to the drowsy god of sleep, and they went into dreams as the great enigma deadened their senses to all around them.

Their repose was short, as daylight showed itself through the opening between the mountains, and the previously silent camp was now one of busy activity. The before waning fires blazed and crackled, and voices, in every direction, could be heard in conversation, or humming Mexican ballads or war-songs.

Paula and Humfredo arose with the first signs of life in the encampment, and the latter busied himself in preparing their morning repast. During its preparation the commander of the troop, a Mexican, apparently thirty years of age, whose face was lightly tinged with the hue denoting native blood, approached them. His features were regular, even handsome; his eyes dark and expressive; form the medium light, and manners those of a Mexican gentleman. Addressing Paula, he said:

“Your name, senor?”

"Hernando Vidal."

"Which route?"

"City of Mexico."

"City of Mexico?" he said, and a strange expression flitted over his face.

Paula Vallejo noticed this expression, and she knew that these queries were but a prelude to questions of a more important character, which were to cause her to divulge what party she was an adherent of.

"Have you business there?"

"I have."

"With whom?"

"Ramon Mendez."

"Carajo!" he ejaculated, and a frown settled upon his brow. "Ramon Mendez, the traitor!"

Paula now knew sufficient to convince her that her questioner was a staunch Liberal and hated the Imperial Government with the same bitterness as herself.

"I am true to my country," she said.

"If so, why visit Ramon Mendez—the traitor—the assassin?"

"For the good of Mexico, and to gain the power to destroy the White Tiger of the Tropics."

"What proof have I of this?"

"A few hours' ride from here is the camp of the Tigers, on the point of the mountain-spur that runs into the valley."

"True."

"There are but two passes to his stronghold, and they are both guarded."

"True."

"But there are other passes."

"One," he answered, and the expression of his face passed from that of doubt to one of inquiry.

"More than one," persisted Paula.

She raised her hand so that the ring on it was exposed to view, touched the spring, and the head of the Crested Serpent flew out, then disappeared. A look of enthusiasm pervaded his face, and he extended his hand, exclaiming:

"Marta! Go, the road is open to you. She is true to Mexico and her people."

"Know you the hacienda Santa Luzia?"

"Senor Jose Vallejo's?"

"Yes."

"Marta is there. She will tell you all. Await, out of reach of the Tigers, my return, and we will obliterate from the mountain-top the last vestige of these men of blood."

"The road is open to you, Senor Vidal. My name is Alberto Tristan, captain of the Comargo rifles, and I am proud to say they have won distinction during the war."

Humfredo was introduced as Marta's son, and was warmly greeted by Tristan, and before the sun had commenced to throw out his warm beams, they were gathered around one fire, enjoying the hospitalities of Captain Alberto Tristan.

"Senor Steager," said Tristan, addressing an officer who advanced toward them, "my friends." The introduction was formal and polite on both sides. "After you have refreshed yourself, take twenty men and skirt the base of the mountain near the Old Mission, and pursue the route to Vega motte, in the rear of hacienda Santa Luzia. We will follow."

"Steager will obey the captain's orders."

"Senor Steager is my lieutenant. He is brave, eccentric, and a man of finished education and superior attainments. He is an American, but of German descent; was educated at Heidelberg, and has all the mannerisms of the stalwart Germans, reminding one of the barons of the olden times. Being a draughtsman, he has, in the character of a spy, made himself invaluable to our Generals, and could now hold a high position, but he will not quit that of lieutenant of the Comargo rifles."

Steager was a man of at least five feet ten inches high. His form was well knit, the hands being small and stout; wrists round, and arms showing swells of muscle under his coat-sleeves; hair long, black, and sprinkled with gray, and mustache heavy and dark, silvered like his hair. A pale, broad, high forehead surmounted heavy eyebrows; eyes of a deep gray, and a face the paleness of which could not be entirely obliterated by the sun of Mexico. As he rode away, at the head of his men he presented the appearance of a man born to the saddle and warlike deeds.

After their morning meal Paula and Humfredo mounted

their horses and bade adios to Alberto Tristan, and boldly took the plain road that led to the city of Mexico. Avoiding the town of Tula, they left the volcanic ranges and mountain-peaks to their left, and traveled southward toward their destination, and were gratified, one evening, to see in the distance the towering peaks of Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl. By twelve o'clock the next day, they were riding through the narrow streets inside the walls of the famed city of Mexico, and entered the grand plaza, where, years ago, the army of General Scott had raised the flag of the United States over the national palace.

The city was filled with armed men, and artillery, caissons, wagons, infantry and cavalry were moving through the plaza and entering streets that radiated from it.

Finding lodgings, Paula and Humfredo sallied forth upon their mission—that of seeing the famous General, Ramon Mendez; and, on inquiry, were pointed to a building on the grand plaza, the main entrance to which was surrounded by officers and soldiers; and before the pavement were horses caparisoned in the usual Mexican style of gold and silver mountings.

Paula entered, and after a delay of a few minutes was ushered into the presence of Mendez, the Imperial General.

“Your business, senors?”

I wish to attach myself as an officer, to the regiment of Arnaud Boussard, the White Tiger of the Tropics.”

“As an officer?”

“Yes, General. I can do much good in the position of an officer, while as a private soldier, I would be trammelled in my actions.”

“Where is the regiment of Senor Boussard?”

“On the mountain spur near hacienda Luzia.”

“True. Do you reside there?”

“I know every foot of ground thence to the Rio Grande.”

Mendez mused.

“What evidence have I of your loyalty?”

“Only this,” and the head of the Crested Serpent flew from the ring.

An ashy paleness overspread his face; then it was suffused with blushes, as if the memory of his past life had

overflowed his being as the waters of the Nile overflow its low banks. He uttered in subdued tones :

“Marta! Enough. You are now lieutenant-colonel of Arnaud Boussard's regiment. The late incumbent was killed in battle. Your name?”

“Hernando Vidal.”

Paula left the quarters of Mendez a commissioned officer of the Tigers. Now she would be near her foes, and revenge would be within her grasp.

CHAPTER IV.

THE AMBUSCADE AND THE ARAB SONG.

ON the morning that Steager and his guard of twenty brave Liberals were skirting the mountains, at the base of which rested the old stone mission (now inhabited by priests and used as a chapel for worship), Arnaud Boussard, commanding fifty men, was in the saddle, hid in the undergrowth and chaparral, expecting a body of Mexicans from in the direction of hacienda Santa Luzia. Boussard's appearance was much changed. He was now dressed in a complete suit of buck-skin, and the jacket he wore was plated with steel, and extended down to his waist. His feet were incased in heavy cavalry boots, and upon his head he wore a closely-fitting cap, from which extended a single dark feather. In his holsters were the two fine pistols before mentioned, around his waist was buckled a belt the scabbard of which, hanging on the right-hand side, contained another, and from his left side dangled a huge cavalry saber.

His scouts informed him that a troop of twenty horse was advancing from in the direction of Tula, but that they could not ascertain whether they were friend or foe.

“They cannot be friends or they would be on the other side of the valley. My position is well known at head-quarters. Prepare to charge them,” said Boussard, in a haughty tone.

On came Steager and his little command, their eyes riveted

upon the point of the mountain spur where the Tiger chief was supposed to be. It was a pretty sight as they swept along the base of the mountain in the morning dew, their tongues quiet, but eyes sparkling and heads erect, thinking that they were stealing past the dreaded White Tiger of the Tropics as he slept in his mountain lair.

A cry, loud and shrill, arose. It was Arnaud Boussard's order to charge, and with a wild, almost unearthly yell, the hundred Tigers crushed to the earth, in a mass, the surprised Liberals. Steager's quick eye saw the advance of the Tigers. He drew his saber instead of his pistol, and clove the first enemy to the ground; then another, and finally broke from the dying and butchered men. Boussard saw Steager's escape, and on his blooded horse followed, when a fight that was fierce and desperate occurred, and fire flashed and fell in sparks from their blades. Boussard knew that his opponent was not a Mexican, and desired to capture him. With dexterous movement he parried a thrust from Steager, then launched his saber into the flanks of the Liberal's horse. It reared, plunged, and fell. The fall was so sudden and violent that Steager was stunned, and when he thoroughly recovered was in the hands of the enemy, and supported upon a horse that was rapidly approaching the mountain spur. They rode up the mountain pass, and only stopped when in the camp of the Tigers.

From the brow of the mountain the fight had been witnessed by Murieta, and when they entered the camp she was ready to receive them.

"Bind him," said Boussard, "until I am ready to question him."

Steager was securely bound and placed under the wide branches of an oak, and a blanket given to him upon which he could recline.

"What will you do with this prisoner, Arnaud?" asked Murieta.

"Try to win him to our side; you must do that, as he is a brave soldier and one of the best swordsmen I ever came in contact with. If he refuses to enter into our schemes, then the tree and a halter. But, Murieta, you can win him to our cause."

The fight had been disastrous to the twenty Liberals. All were killed, and but five of the enemy destroyed in return, as the surprise was complete. Their rifles, pistols, sabers, horses, and accouterments, were taken as spoil, and the dead bodies left to fester in the sun.

"Bring the prisoner!" said Boussard to a guard standing near. Steager was brought to the marquee where Boussard was sitting on a camp-stool. The prisoner being offered a seat gladly accepted it, as his limbs were stiff and sore from the fall he received in the encounter in the valley.

"What is your rank in the Liberal army?"

"Stéager is a lieutenant."

"That is your name, then?"

"Yes; Steager."

"As brave a man as you have proven yourself to be should stand higher in the roll. What rank would induce you to enter the service of Maximilian?"

"Steager wants no rank. All he asks is a good horse and trusty saber."

"Would not the position of lieutenant-colonel tempt you?"

"Not even the position of emperor."

"Murieta!" said Boussard, and he stepped hurriedly away.

The folds of the tent opened, and Murieta, dressed in faultless attire, came out. She bowed low to Steager, who returned her salutations in as polite a manner as his fastened limbs would permit.

"You are bound," she said. "How cruel!" and a compassionate look rested on her beautiful brown face, and with her own hands she let go the bands that confined his arms.

"Steager is grateful to you, madam, and will not forget this act of kindness."

She entered the marquee and returned with a goblet of pure wine and offered it to him. The eccentric Steager loved wine above all other drinks. The night-air had cooled it, and it sparkled as the thirsty lips of the brave soldier touched it. He sipped it, then with one great gulp it disappeared down his throat.

"Good—very good; no better wine than that. Steager is a judge. He knows the pure wine from the bad. That is good wine."

She had touched a tender spot in the nature of the Liberal soldier, and again she filled his goblet, and as he sipped it, he talked as glibly as though among his companions, the Comargo rifles.

Throwing open the broad folds of the tent, she invited him to enter, and he was astonished at the oriental elegance that displayed itself.

"Be seated, Senor Steager—that is your name, I believe—Steager?"

"Steager; that is it, madam."

Grasping her harp, she ran her fingers over the strings with astonishing swiftness; then from the unintelligible sounds there broke one beautiful and low, and Murieta's voice rose and fell with it, as rippling waves upon a shell-strewn strand. It was an Arabian love-song. Her deep-red eyes were swimming in a liquid light, and she acted as one absorbed in the sweet music that was blossoming and bursting forth in fragrant roses. Murieta was only acting, and she struggled, by art, deception and genius, to gain that which her husband had failed to gain, the Liberal soldier over to the Imperial cause, so that in the end they could use him to their own purposes. She ceased playing, and languidly laid her harp aside.

Strange thoughts passed through the honest head of Steager, and with wine, music, and a beautiful woman reclining upon crimson cushions, he came to the conclusion that being a prisoner in the hands of the Tiger was rather a pleasant affair.

"Senor Steager, will you not renounce the service of the Liberals and espouse our cause? I will interest myself in your behalf, and you will reach a high position in the Imperial service."

A look of displeasure passed over the visage of the prisoner, and he gazed from the tent to the high peaks of the mountain in the distance.

"Madam, Steager would not sell his honor for all the wealth of Mexico. He is poor in purse, but rich in honor. No, he would not change positions now with the usurper Maximilian."

She looked steadily into his honest gray eyes, and in them saw a determination that no honors, no wealth, nor wine nor

women, could change. She saw that he was true to the cause he had espoused—as steadfast as the rocks that formed the base of the mountain upon which they were encamped.

“You cannot be changed?”

“Steager can die a patriot; but he can never live a traitor,” and he arose from his sitting posture and drew himself proudly up.

“Then I fear for your fate.”

Boussard entered at this moment.

“Has the brave prisoner concluded to join the Imperial forces?”

“He has not,” replied Steager.

“I will give you one week in which to change your mind. At the expiration of that time, unless you have consented to become one of us, I will hang you as an enemy to the empire. Guards, take the prisoner away; place him in comfortable quarters, but guard him well.”

“Arnaud,” said Murieta, “he is as rock. Nothing will change him. Could we but get five thousand such men as this Steager in our service, we could commence a revolution here and roll it southward until we crushed every thing before us, and were seated upon the throne, the diadem upon our heads.”

“If he fails to change, we will hang him. Such a man is dangerous to our cause.”

While these events were transpiring, Alberto Tristan and his riflemen were cautiously advancing in the trail of Steager, when suddenly they came upon the dead body of the Liberal's horse. They then knew that a fight had taken place. Slowly they moved forward, riding in the chaparral that skirted the trail, when, horror! their eyes rested upon the dead bodies of their twenty comrades, hacked and mutilated. Dragging them into the chaparral, they covered them with dead limbs and leaves, intending to return that night and bury them.

Search was made for the brave Steager, but his remains could not be found, when it was decided that he was a prisoner in the hands of the enemy. Fearful were the curses of the comrades of the dead men, and they swore to avenge their deaths.

Leaving the scene of butchery they rode secretly past the mission, and shaped their route toward Vega motte, which was one league west of hacienda Santa Luzia. Arriving there they made preparations for a permanent camp, feeling satisfied that the Tigers would not venture that distance from their mountain stronghold.

Vega motte was a grove of oak trees, and in its center a lake that never became exhausted by the heats of summer. Here encamped Alberto Tristan and his Comargo rifles.

That night after darkness had set in, Alberto Tristan mounted his horse and rode to the hacienda Santa Luzia. Applying for admittance, the gray head and piercing eyes of Marta gazed into the darkness.

"Who comes?" she asked, shading her eyes with her hands.

"A friend," replied Tristan, and then uttered a few words in an unintelligible tongue.

"Welcome; doubly welcome, my son!" said Marta, as she opened wide the door.

He entered and grasped her hand in his.

"Are all true who reside here?" he asked.

"All; true as steel."

He then told her of meeting Humfredo and Hernando Vidal; how they had passed through their camp, their passport being the talismanic ring; how the advance-guard had been cut to pieces by the Tigers, and the supposed capture of Steager; and that he and his companions were encamped near the hacienda and would there remain until the return of Vidal and Humfredo.

"On the return of my son and Senor Vidal (we must now call Paula by that name), I will enter the quarters of the Tigers in the character of a sorceress. But I must await the entrance of Humfredo and Senor Vidal into the enemy's camp so that I can gain information of their plans and an insight into the former lives of Boussard and his Arab wife. Through the instrumentality of the cave, I will nightly receive news from the Tigers, and then suddenly appear in their midst and startle them with my knowledge of their previous acts and very thoughts. By doing this, I will gain a power over them and lure them to certain destruction. Your command must

remain where it is ; besides, many more men must be within easy march of the cave when the final blow is to be struck."

"Marta, you can depend upon my co-operation, as the dead bodies of my comrades, that are before this hour under ground, cry aloud for vengeance on their destroyers. Besides, I will dispatch a courier, to-morrow, to Colonel Gonzales."

"When Senor Vidal and Humfredo return, I will give you timely warning," said Marta.

He arose, and bowing low, left the hacienda, mounted his horse, and returned to his camp at Vega motte.

"Alcatar," he said, as he threw his lariat to a youthful Mexican, "has the burial party returned?"

"They have, Senor Tristan. All are buried deep in the ground—all save Senor Steager, and he could not be found."

"He is a prisoner," ejaculated Tristan, to himself. "We will rescue him. Steager is too brave, too gallant to be left in the hands of such a bloodthirsty villain as the White Tiger of the Tropics;" saying which he sauntered to his own fire, and not many minutes elapsed before all were wrapped in their blankets and courting refreshing sleep.

CHAPTER V.

TRAILED TO THE MOUNTAIN CAVERN.

Four days from the events of the previous chapter, Hernando Vidal and Humfredo, during the early hours of the night, rode to the hacienda Santa Luzia.

"Marta, to-morrow Humfredo and myself will be in the stronghold of the Tigers, and nightly will communicate with you in the Aztec cave," said Vidal, as he sat in converse with Marta, the high priestess.

"I will be there," she said, in measured tones ; "and when I gain sufficient knowledge of the lives and schemes of these human fiends, I will enter their camp in the character of a sorceress, and before the winds of winter yellow the foliage on the trees, they will be with Marta in the Aztec cave, and

there and then their doom will be sealed, and Jose Vallejo avenged."

"Come, Humfredo, we must to Vega motte."

They rode along in silence, until a challenge warned them that the camp of the Comargo rifles had been reached, and fires showed their fitful, twinkling lights among the trees and chaparral.

"Ah, welcome, Senor Vidal. Dismount, both of you, and be seated," and Captain Tristan spread a blanket before a blazing fire.

Their talk was long and confidential. They finally bade each other adieu in quiet tones, and Vidal and Humfredo returned to the hacienda.

Early next morning, Vidal and Humfredo were boldly riding toward the mountain, which they skirted upon reaching, until the guarded pass to the 'Tigers' camp was gained. Slowly they wended their way upward until a gun was presented at them, and a challenge followed.

"We wish to see Colonel Arnaud Boussard," replied Vidal, in answer to the challenge of the guard.

The gun was lowered and they passed on, and at intervals were challenged, as at the first, until they reached the plateau where the marquee stood. Boussard was summoned and quickly made his appearance.

"Why am I indebted to you, senor"—speaking to Vidal—"for this early and unlooked-for visit?"

"I came from the city of Mexico, and bear papers addressed to Colonel Arnaud Boussard," replied Vidal, at the same time handing him the commission.

"Hernando Vidal! commissioned as lieutenant-colonel in my regiment!" and he glanced from the paper he held in his hand to the face of Vidal, who sat upon his horse erect and dignified. No tremor betrayed his feelings, nor tell-tale flush caused suspicion.

"Dismount, and give your horse into the hands of your attendant. Come in."

They entered the tent. The Arab woman arose from a reclining position, and her glittering eyes looked into the dark orbs of Hernando Vidal. What was it that caused her to shudder as though a cold wind from the north, laden with the

chill breath of the ice-bound polar seas, had touched her shapely form? Was it from a presentiment that evil was about to burst upon her—or had the dark eyes of Vidal pierced her heart and laid bare the poison that had nestled there in aspic folds for years? She trembled, and as she bowed to the handsome lieutenant-colonel, and spoke in return to his polite words, a tremor pervaded her voice, and Boussard raised his head and looked at her in surprise.

“Senor Vidal, we will furnish quarters for you to-day.”

“Thanks, Senor Boussard. You hold the post of honor in the army. Ramon Mendez spoke of you and your command in glowing terms.”

“Mendez is a true General. He fights the enemy with a bloody sword, and has already shot a number of Liberal Generals. It is the true policy. If I were commander-in-chief I would shoot all who failed to renounce their allegiance to the Mexican cause. I now have a prisoner, captured a few days ago, who must hang before long. He is a gallant fellow, and therefore a dangerous enemy to live.”

“His name, Senor Boussard?”

“He calls himself Steager.”

“Steager? I am not familiar with the name.”

“He is confined on the edge of the mountain,” and he pointed to a small tent near the spot where Humfredo had lain in agony as he witnessed the execution of his kind master.

“When will you execute him?”

“Day after to-morrow, at sunrise,” answered Boussard.

“Is the Imperial cause progressing in this district, Senor Boussard?”

He cast a quick glance at Vidal, as he replied:

“I fear not. Maximilian is no favorite here.”

“Nor in the south of Mexico.”

“Not a favorite in the south of Mexico? Then where is he a favorite? Not in the north or west.”

“There is better material in our army than in all Austria,” Vidal said, in a meaning way.

“Have you thought seriously over this, Senor Vidal?”

“I have.”

“And would you like to see a change?”

Vidal felt satisfied that there would be no danger in the reply that hung on his lips, and he slowly said :

“ I would.”

“ Your hand, Senor Vidal. The standard could be raised here, on this mountain, and before the passage of a month we would place the Imperial diadem upon the head of a man who could rule Mexico.”

“ Shall I be plain with you, Senor Boussard ? I will speak though it may be called treason. Your name, Arnaud Boussard, has been spoken of in the south. Being descended from Iturbide, the first emperor of this country after Spanish rule commenced, my whole soul is centered in an Imperial form of government. But it must be strong. Your warlike spirit and valorous deeds have caused the eyes of the whole south of Mexico to be turned to you. This inspired me with a hope that the empire would not die with Maximilian ; and knowing that a vacancy existed in your regiment, I applied for the position of lieutenant colonel, so that I could be near you, and learn, at any risk, whether you would be willing to declare against the Austrian, command the people of the south, and advance on the city of Mexico.”

There was a pause, and in the face of Boussard were evidences of a joy he could hardly restrain. The people of the south calling for him ! His deeds of bloodshed and rapine called deeds of valor ! The people he had sabred, hung up by the necks, driven from their homes, *calling* for him to lead them against the proud Austrian ! Already he felt the diadem encircling his brow, and grasped the scepter that was so hard to retain. Yet he would keep it if he had to erect scaffolds in every town and city in betrayed and blood-stained Mexico. He was fast reaching the heights of his ambition and soon would cross its disk for the golden fields that lay beyond.

“ Can I trust the people, Senor Vidal ?”

“ You can trust them until you gain a strength that will make them fear you. Will you co-operate with me and my friends in the movement, and lead us to victory and the Imperial government ; and will you accept the diadem ?”

“ I will, and now enter into a compact with you to that effect ; and when success crowns our efforts, Hernando Vidal

will wear a title second to Arnaud Boussard in the empire."

Vidal bowed low as if in acknowledgment of what was in store for him.

"I will bid you adieu, for the present, Senor Vidal. The camp lies around you and there is the prisoner's tent. Your quarters will be immediately prepared. The countersign is *Tampico*."

Vidal slowly sauntered to where the prisoner was confined, gave the guard the countersign, and entered. Steager sat upon a blanket, with limbs unbound. As Vidal entered he hurriedly arose to his feet, exclaiming:

"*You a traitor?*"

"No, senor; hush—speak low! I will prove your liberator to-morrow night. Be on the alert after the mission bell rings. When you are free, go direct to Vega motte, where camp the Comargo rifles. Tell Captain Tristan that I am in the camp of the enemy and know much."

"Steager will remember."

Vidal left the tent, remarking as he passed the guard:

"He will hang day after to-morrow. Make good food for the carrion crows."

A grim smile lighted up the leather-colored face of the guard as he contemplated the scene, and in his mind's eye saw the muscular form of Steager dangling between heaven and earth.

While the conversation was being held between Steager and Vidal, Boussard was in the marquee with Murieta.

"Events, you see, favor me," said Boussard.

"Do you not fear him? When introduced he cast upon me such a bewildering look—seemingly one of cruelty and hatred—that I shrunk from him."

"Imagination. He comes with a commission, direct from my best friend, Ramon Mendez, and you personally know his feelings toward Maximilian."

"I have met this man before, or seen him in my dreams. To gain the goal we are running for we must make confidants, and no more suitable person than your lieutenant-colonel—if he is true to the cause."

"My life upon it, Murieta, he will be true to us as he is

to-day true to an Imperial form of Government. He is descended from good blood. Iturbide, first emperor since the commencement of Spanish rule, is proud, and no doubt brave and honest."

The tents of Vidal and Humfredo were erected near the marquee of Arnaud Boussard, with their rears almost touching the rocks on the western side of the mountain. The tent for Vidal was furnished in a manner agreeing with his rank, the hand of Murieta arranging cushions and blankets in truly oriental style.

Boussard, Murieta, and Vidal ate their evening meal together, and the conversation was lively, full of wit, and apparent good humor; but the mask of the actor covered the feelings of Vidal. He was breaking bread with the two who had hurriedly and unprepared, launched his father into eternity. Yet Vidal smiled and choked down the bitter flood of hate that almost broke out at every peal of laughter from Boussard and the Arabian woman.

Night was approaching as the soldiers' camp-fires commenced to show through the trees. Vidal and Humfredo were in close conversation, for on that night, at the sounding of the mission bell, he would have to make his route down the mountain and hurry away to the Aztec cave.

Hour after hour crept slowly along, and all except the guards were asleep, or profoundly quiet, when the bell in the old mission slowly sent its warning over the prairie and up the mountain to Humfredo that Marta awaited her son in the cave of the Aztecs. He heard it and crept like a reptile from his tent to the rear of the one in which the prisoner was confined. He could have released him; but the time had not come for Steager's delivery from his enemies. Parting the bushes with his hands, he crept over the edge of the rocks, and through the aid of vines and branches, lowered himself down at least fifteen feet, until he rested on a table-like rock. Letting go the vines, he skirted the mountain on the apparently perilous ledge, until a cluster of cactus and rocks blocked his further course. Pushing aside the prickly cactus, a crevice exhibited itself, into which Humfredo plunged without faltering. Once inside, he lighted a taper, and as the light spread, dispelling the darkness, a broad pas-

sageway stretched before him, which he traversed as fast as he possibly could. It descended in devious ways, until, at length, it suddenly came to an end. Here he extinguished the taper, and by a dexterous movement a portion of the rock where he had rested moved, and the starry firmament was disclosed to him. Leaving the mountain base, he passed its point toward the east, until he struck the trail that led to the Aztec cave, and by a continued swinging trot was not long in reaching the secret entrance, and once more stood in the Aztec chapel.

"My son, you are safe, and I am satisfied the one you serve is also safe."

"Yes, mother, we are both safe, and Senor Vidal is now lieutenant-colonel in the Tiger regiment.

"That is as it should be. Be prudent, and we will have Arnaud Boussard and Murieta, the Arab woman, writhing in the agonies of death in this chamber."

Humfredo then gave her all the required information in reference to the aspirations of Boussard and Murieta, and Vidal's supposed connection with the dead emperor, Iturbide.

"To-morrow I shall enter the camp of the Tigers. Then their fate will be sealed, for I will lead them to their awful doom so sure as the planets shine above us in their solemn beauty."

"Adios, dear mother; I must away."

He kissed his mother's brow and retraced his steps to the outlet from the mountain's side. Touching the secret spring, the rocky slab slid aside, and he stepped from the passageway, and the rock moved back and closed the aperture. With a rapid step he went forward, when a hand was laid upon his shoulder. Almost paralyzed with terror at the fear that his secret was discovered, he stood as if rooted to the spot.

"The young senor has a secret," said a harsh voice, "and the White Tiger of the Tropics has fallen into bad hands. Ha! ha! old Lopez was out drinking the inspiring *ardiente*, when he saw you take what seemed a cold trail. What have you in there, you young spying devils?" and he renewed his powerful grasp upon Humfredo.

What was to be done? The Mexican was a man of great strength, and there was no escape from him. A combat with

knives would be in favor of the drunken Mexican, and if not, would endanger their plans. A sudden thought went through his mind, and he reeled like a man under the influence of liquor.

"Good wine—plenty of it, *senor*. Like the wine that flows in Rome during carnival—yellow as sunshine, and makes a man feel like a god."

"Wine, did you say, my little *vacquero*? my little night-rambler? Wine, eh? Quick! tell me where it is. Carajo! be quick."

"It belongs to *Senor Vidal*—but you shall have it," said *Humfredo*.

He staggered to the closed rock, touched the secret spring, and it opened.

"In, *Senor Bravo*, good soldier, and we will drink until morning."

Lopez entered; the rock shut with a snap, and the light of the outer world closed upon him forever.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FALSE PROPHETESS.

LOPEZ, when the rock closed upon him, uttered a howl of rage and threw his weight against it; but of no avail. His situation then dawned to his fuddled brain, and he realized the fact that he was closed in a tomb beneath the mountain. The awful thought that he would, perhaps, be left in that dark place to die for want of water and food, almost crazed his brain, and he yelled until he became hoarse, and only a dull sound came back as if in mockery of his agony. At length he commenced to grope his way in the direction of the chamber, wherein *Marta* now lay in sleep; a ray of light showed itself in the distance.

"Courage, *Senor Lopez*! Where there is a lighted taper, there is life—and perhaps wine."

Drawing his knife he crept cautiously forward until he

stood in the entrance of the Aztec chapel. He staggered back with amazement at what he saw.

"Courage, Senor Lopez. If the devil himself is here we must have a round with him. We came here for wine, and, carajo, we will have wine," and he stepped upon the terrace where Marta had lain down for repose, her gray hairs falling down to the stone floor.

"A mountain witch! Santa Marie, what next! I was foully entrapped in this place, and this woman knows the way out. She's human, and I'll arouse her. Wine I came for, and wine I'll have," and he chuckled hoarsely.

Catching Marta by the shoulder, he shook her violently. She opened her eyes, then sat upright and looked into the hard face of Lopez.

"Who is he that enters the Aztec cave?"

"Lopez—Senor Lopez, of the Imperial army."

"Does he know Marta, the high priestess?"

"No; he was fraudulently put in this den of darkness by a spy. He said there was wine here that rivaled sunshine; wine that would make a man feel like a god. When I again lay hands on him I will cut his throat. You old rat-eater, have you any wine—wine that will set the blood on fire and put new life in one's stiff limbs—the elixir of life, which flows like the oils of the Israelites of the holy land?"

Marta looked at this burly Mexican, and she guessed at once what had occurred. Something quick and decisive had to be done.

"Yes, Marta has wine that is as old as the hills, and as red as blood; wine as clear as the waters that run in the limpid Tula."

"Then give it to Lopez, or he will cut your throat as he will, to-morrow, cut the throat of the vile young dog who shut him up in this wizard's den."

"Follow," and she stepped down into the serpent's chamber, entered a side door, and in a moment returned with a flask and goblet. He had followed, and stood by her side. She poured a goblet full to overflowing with yellow, oily wine, and handed it to him; and as he drank it off, closed the aperture where they had entered.

"More!" he said, and extended the goblet.

She poured out more, then glided out of the chamber, and Señor Lopez was alone sipping his wine.

"By the north pole, Señor Juan Augustino Lopez of the Imperial Tigers, this is good wine. You must make this your head-quarters so long as your gallant colonel stays upon the mountain. More wine, you old witch, you—"

A strain of music, slow and solemn, rose and died away.

"That sounds like a dirge. Can she be a Lucretia Borgia?" and his face grew ashy-pale, as he laughed a half-frightened laugh. "Carajo! more wine, old woman—"

Again the solemn tones reverberated through the chamber, and Lopez paused in alarm. He turned and uttered a cry of horror. From the glittering rocks protruded the head of the Crested Serpent. He rushed toward the entrance by which he had entered, and was met by a solid wall. He attempted to climb, but fell back exhausted. The music rolled on in solemn tones, and the serpent glided down until its flashing sides reflected the phosphorescent light from the chamber. Lopez crouched in a corner, his face distorted with terror, and reached for his knife. It was gone. The music ceased its sad tones, and rolled and thundered like the agonies of a legendary demon, until the cavern seemed to shriek with pain. The serpent reared its head, and lashed its long form as if in a whirl of fury, then darted upon the trembling, crouching Mexican and wrapped him in its vise-like folds, and they rolled and writhed upon the floor, a hideous mass.

The following morning, with the last echo of the signal bugle that came back from the distant mountain peaks, the camp became all life and activity. The military routine was gone through with; fires flared up brightly, welcoming the red sun, and the duties of another day were entered upon.

The Tigers had seen their new lieutenant-colonel, and, although of savage natures and mixed races, they were well pleased with him, and wherever Hernando Vidal walked among them he met with salutations of respect.

After the meridian hour, Señor Vidal, Boussard and Murieta were seated in the grand marquee. The brown woman of the sandy plains, harp in hand, was singing snatches of Arabic songs, as she, in a half-sitting posture, rested among damask and crimson cushions.

"Senor Boussard," said a guard, as he stood in front of the tent, "a strange woman has invaded the camp, and asks to see you."

"A strange woman? How did she pass the guards?"

"She has been in the camp since sunrise, and the relieved guards from the north entrance say that she did not pass them, and the same is said by those at the pass. Perhaps she dropped from the clouds, as there is no other way to ascend these steep mountain-sides than by the two guarded routes."

"Send her to me."

Marta came forward. Her long gray hair fell down over her shoulders, and her slender form was incased in a robe of black, corded at the waist by a girdle made of horse-hair. In her right hand she bore a long staff, and in her left a green bough:

"Come in, woman," said Boussard, and he raised the folds of the spacious marquee.

She entered and stood before them, exciting apparent surprise from Vidal, and real astonishment from Murieta.

"Speak, woman! How did you get upon the mountain-top without the knowledge of our guards?" said Boussard.

"I came from the stars."

"Arnaud, she is crazed; speak to her kindly," remarked Murieta, as she looked intently at the gray-headed intruder in the Tiger camp.

"Then you possess supernatural powers?" he said, sarcastically.

"I do."

The cynical, cold look was again on his face, and his eyes sneeringly bent upon Marta.

"Who am I?"

She waved her staff over his head, then took his right hand and traced the lines that ran through it. Stopping suddenly, she broke out in a wild, shrill tone:

"You will be a king—you will be a king!"

A flush surmounted Boussard's sallow face, and the cold, settled expression of doubt softened, and he looked at Vidal and Murieta.

"You are the White Tiger of the Tropics—a child of the sun, like myself. A diadem will rest upon your brow. Al-

ready the brave men of the south have commenced to march," and she reclined her head as if in an attitude of listening; "They await the raising of a standard in the north—it is raised, and a cry goes up, 'Long live Emperor Arnaud!' They march to battle—their enemies are driven into the sea, and you—you, Arnaud Boussard—are emperor of this proud land!"

Murieta's eyes dilated, and were as coals of fire. She arose from the cushions and eagerly listened to the apparently inspired language of Marta; and when she proclaimed Boussard emperor, Murieta flung herself before her and grasped her hands, exclaiming:

"Thou inspired prophetess! When that day comes thou shalt revel in regal wealth."

"Arise, daughter of Arabia; you will be the bright star in the Imperial diadem."

"Senor Vidal, is this not wonderful? She comes among us like a phantom, and predicts what we wished, and what none other than Murieta, yourself and myself know."

"Wonderful! wonderful!" said Vidal. "Woman, what is in store for me?"

Marta turned to Vidal, took his delicate bronzed hand and intently looked at the palm.

"You will be second in the affections of the great emperor, and first in war and first in council. A diadem has been on that head. I see dim traces of it upon your brow; but it was long ago."

"She is endowed with the power to trace the lineage of men as well as read the future. I will test her further. We have a prisoner who will be hanged unless he becomes an Imperialist. His time is short," said Boussard. "Will he desert his cause?"

Marta placed her hand upon her forehead, as if in deep thought; looked from the tent into the dazzling sun, then said, in low tones:

"He will not desert his cause."

"Guards, bring in the prisoner," said Boussard to the soldiers around the tent.

Steager entered the marquee, but with cold indifference noticed no one inside the canvas tent.

"Senor Steager, will you renounce your allegiance to the Liberal cause, and join the Imperial ranks? High honors await you."

"Steager would like to save his life, but Steager can not purchase it at such a price."

"Then your doom is sealed. Think again. What is your answer?"

"Steager has spoken."

"To-morrow at sunrise you die, by hanging. We have a novel way of disposing of such as you, Senor Steager. No trap; just a gentle lift from mother earth, and all is over. Take him back to the tent and guard him well. If he escapes the guard hang in his stead. 'You spoke truly,' addressing Marta. "He will surely hang."

"I can see a scaffold in the distance, but not for him. There are two victims, but not this one."

"You are at fault there. No power on earth can save him now. The White Tiger of the Tropics has spoken; and by the white hairs that crown his head, this man must hang!"

"Know you, wonderful woman," said Murieta, in awe, "ought of me?"

Gazing a moment into Murieta's face, the prophetess answered:

"You lived with your father on the desert sands of Arabia, and whither he roved you went; what he ate, you ate, and his sun was your sun. A stranger came among you, bold and warlike. You sung to him when the stars, which I read as a book, took their mysterious shapes upon the face of the dark sky, and he listened and loved, and by the rites of the Mohammedan faith you bound yourself to him for life. Your destinies, that have been traced on the book of prophecy, caused you to leave the arid plains and the delightful groves that margin them, for the land of the Aztecs, where the prophecy is about to be fulfilled."

"Woman, whence all this power—all this knowledge?" said Murieta.

"From the stars."

"Where do you reside?"

"In the air—everywhere. I go," and she strode from the tent and took her way through the encampment.

"Senor Vidal, send the youth you call Humfredo in her path. Tell him not to lose sight of her until she quits the mountain," said Boussard.

"He will trail her until she leaves the mountain," replied Vidal, as he left the marquee.

On his return, all that had transpired was discussed at length, and the superstitious Arabian woman thought she saw in Marta a being possessed of supernatural powers.

"Senor Vidal, if what she says is a reflection of the future, the south will take up arms first; then we will raise the standard here and drive our enemies into the sea. She read to us the past as though it lay open before her as a book," said Boussard, as he stood reflecting over what had transpired.

As they still continued to discuss the visit of Marta, Humfredo returned.

"Well," said Boussard, "did you trail her to the outlet?"

"Senor, I followed her to the center of the mountain, and for one moment—only one moment—took my eyes from her, as a wolf ran by, when she disappeared. I believe she vanished in the air."

"Were there rocks about?" queried Boussard.

"Few; yet I was so close upon her that she could gain no time to secrete herself. No, senor," and a look of apparent dread passed over the face of Humfredo; "she disappeared in air. She is not human. Besides, I have often heard strange stories of this mountain, and that a spirit of prophecy inhabits it—one that foretells wars and famines, and people say that she is a spirit of the old Aztecs."

"She will come again," said Murieta, as her eyes glowed with the old light that glowed in them when she sat before her father's tent and listened to the eloquent legendary tales that were told by the Arab poet-orators who roamed the sandy deserts from camp to camp.

"Senor Vidal," remarked Boussard, "we must know more of her. She has encouraged us in our enterprise, and if her prophecies prove true, we will be among the great of the earth."

Again the music from Murieta's harp filled the marquee with melody, and her voice warbled and trilled, as if it overleaped the tension of the human sound.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ESCAPE AND THE DOOMED.

ON the night before the proposed execution of Steager, that individual lay in his tent bound with thongs—both feet and hands. Vainly did he attempt, with superior strength, to snap them, or even cause the bonds to loosen so that his arms could become free. The hands that wrapped and knotted the cords had done their work well, and unless the promised aid came, he knew that his doom was certain. The hours went by, one by one, and yet no signal from his looked-for friend. Already the heavy breathing of the two guards announced that sleep had claimed them.

“Could he have deceived Steager?” the prisoner muttered to himself. One—two—three—the Mission bell! Now, Steager, you shall see.”

The soft notes of the bell sounded melodiously, and as stroke after stroke was wafted to the prisoner, he strained his ears for other sounds that he would welcome, as the thirsty earth would welcome the refreshing shower.

Was it a rabbit's tread that touched the leaves in the rear of the tent? No; it was the guarded footfalls of Humfredo, as he stole to the back part of the prison. Raising slowly its canvas wall, he crept, with the stealth of a cat, inside the frail structure, and his hands ran rapidly over the prostrate form of Steager. At length he found the thongs that secured the arms of the prisoner. With his knife he cut them in twain, and Steager's arms were again free. Then his other limbs were released, and Steager rose to his feet, and silently they crept from the rear of the Aztec tent, and down the side of the mountain lowered themselves until they reached the ledge then they threaded the same passageway that Humfredo traversed the night before. Reaching the end of the hidden avenue, they paused but a moment, then the firmament, studded with stars, burst upon the view of the released prisoner, and as they stepped as if from the very bowels of the mountain, Steager exclaimed:

"Steager is free. No rest, Steager, until you see the Tiger and his whelps driven from yonder mountain-top. He would hang Steager because he would not renounce his cause."

They were now well out into the valley, and Humfredo pointed the direction to Vega motte.

"Steager knows it, and will soon be there. What can Steager do to reward you for your act? No, no; it can not be rewarded—only by a like return. Good-night," and in his iron grasp he shook the small hand of Humfredo, then swiftly pursued his way in the direction of the camp of the Comargo rifles."

Humfredo again turned his steps toward the Aztec cave, and, on entering, found Marta sitting on the terrace above the chamber of the Crested Serpent.

"I greet you, my own dear, brave mother."

"Welcome, Humfredo, my son."

"Where is the soldier who called himself Lopez?"

"There," said Marta, pointing to a mass of crushed bones and mangled flesh that lay in a corner of the chamber below. "That is the fate of all intruders to the Aztec cave."

Humfredo now explained what Marta had already conjectured, and told of the liberation of Steager.

"All works well, my son. I saw surprise and awe depicted on the face of the Arab woman as I revealed to them my knowledge of the Imperial plot, and predicted that the diadem would rest upon Arnaud Boussard's head. We must have the Arab woman in the cave of the Aztecs, and let her return to Boussard with her tongue laden with descriptions of the sights she has seen. It will captivate his senses and set his soul aflame with ambition and curiosity."

"Mother, it can be done if you command it as though you read it from the book of prophecies."

"Yes, I must again, after the excitement incident to the escape of the prisoner dies away, return to the mountain-top. The Arabs are children of superstition, and this one has eyes that glow like coals of fire when mind and senses are aroused."

The body of Juan Augustino Lopez, who loved the wine of sunshine, was placed in a sack and carried through intricate passages until a small chamber was reached. A stone

slab that fitted with almost wax-like tenacity, was raised, and the body, or jumbled mass, dropped into what appeared a pit or well. Down, down it went, hitting upon projecting rocks with dull thuds, until it fell into water with a heavy splash.

"Thus, my son, with all our enemies."

They again returned to the Aztec chamber, and after conversing upon serious topics for a time, left the cavern—she to direct her steps to hacienda Santa Luzia, and he to climb the mountain to the 'Tigers' camp.

With the first notes of the bugle the White Tiger of the Tropics emerged from his tent. He called a guard of six men to relieve the guard at the tent where Steager was supposed to lay, bound hand and foot, and take charge of the prisoner for the execution that was to take place at sunrise. The guards were relieved, the tent entered, but Steager was not there.

"Seize these traitors!" cried Boussard, and his voice trembled with suppressed emotion. "You are the men who will hang at sunrise!"

The doomed Mexicans were bound and prepared for execution. They pleaded in vain for their lives. Boussard's heart was as stone. Nothing would turn him from his purpose.

Ominous stood the pliant tree, on which the body of Jose Vallejo dangled between heaven and earth, and from the top hung the rope with the fatal noose. Speedily the tree was bent until its top almost touched the ground. One of the victims was placed under it, and all eyes were turned in the direction of the east to catch the first gleam from the luminary that had sent forward its rosy heralds to proclaim its coming. A single ray flashed from the east as an arrow from an Indian's bow, lighted up the tree-tops—and then another, and another, until the trees on the mountain reflected as a dewy mirror the bright beams.

Then came a voice of command, and one of Steager's guards was hurled from the earth into eternity. Again the tree was bent, the dead body removed, and the other living victim placed under the noose. He said one little prayer, in which could be heard murmurings of his wife and child, and

his home in the south of Mexico ; the tree flew back to its upright position, and it once more bore dead human fruit.

"Down with them, and over the mountain with their bodies," said Boussard, as the last victim to his cruelty ceased to writhe and struggle. "This will be a warning to others, Senor Vidal. No more prisoners will escape from us in the future."

He paused and slowly murmured : "The sorceress said he would not hang—and yet she predicted that some one would hang. Strange, strange, that all this should prove true. She saw into the future and exposed its mysteries. She has told me, Arnaud Boussard, that a diadem would rest upon my brow. Will her words, her weird predictions come true? She will come again," and thus musing, the White Tiger of the Tropics slowly walked to his marquee.

After the execution the camp sunk back into its usual state of listless calm and inactivity, the theme of conversation being the escape of the prisoner. Many were the conjectures as to how he made his way from the mountain ; and some believed that he remained hidden away among the trees and rocks. But Boussard thought differently. He believed that gold had corrupted some of his men, and that, through its potent agency, the prisoner had been let down one of the two mountain passes. He was satisfied, for human sacrifices had been offered up to appease his disappointment and deadly anger.

"Senor Vidal, to-morrow I leave the mountain for a hurried scout. In the east are signs of the enemy. I have, day after day, noticed smoke ascending from what is called Vega motte. If they are there in force, it is necessary that we should know it ; if not in force, their camp must be broken up. The command of the Tigers will rest upon you ; and in your charge I confide Murieta. She has many whims ; gratify them, even though they seem absurd. But, never lose sight of her, Senor Vidal. We have much at stake, and she is the genius that spurs me on to ambitious designs. Without her, the music from her hands, the inspiring words from her tongue, and the deep fire of her ardent eyes, the world would be a blank to Arnaud Boussard. When I ride to battle I think of her ; and when my sabre falls in deadly strokes, I

know that for her sake I am carving my way to fame and fortune."

So Arnaud Boussard, the man of blood, the Tiger from the Tropics, a human vampire, whose very nature craved the life-current of man, loved Murieta, the woman of the Arabian plains; loved her with a devotion that no language could express; it was as the love of the tiger and his mate.

All that afternoon preparations for the scout went on, and hilarity and excitement prevailed about the encampment, as the Tigers' mountain life had been one of weary inactivity, while heretofore they had ranged like Cossacks, fighting, feasting and rioting.

That night Humfredo again descended the mountain, and long before midnight was under the shadow of the old mission, *en route* to Vega motte. The guards passed him on into the camp, where he found Steager and Tristan, sitting alone at a fire, talking of the Tigers in the mountain, and weighing the chances of an attack when reinforcements would make their appearance. At the sound of footsteps they both turned, and at sight of Humfredo, Steager jumped to his feet, and, with a hearty laugh, folded his arms around the young Mexican, exclaiming:

"He saved Steager's life, Captain Tristan. Steager will never forget him. Ha! ha! Good boy, captain—went down through the center of the mountain. Could take a thousand men in at the same place."

Tristan greeted him with warmth, and they all sat down before the fire.

"Captain Tristan, Arnaud Boussard, the Tiger, marches for Vega to-morrow morning, with two hundred men. Senor Vidal sends this message to you."

"When he comes the bed will be warm but the bird gone."

"He wishes you to decoy Boussard so that he will remain upon the scout over to-morrow night."

"It shall be done. We will separate in four parties, and make our appearance in different timbers, so that he will be left in doubt as to our strength. Being a good commander, he will not retire from the field until he has tested our strength."

"I must now return." Adios."

Humfredo visited hacienda Santa Luzia and informed his mother of the proposed scout. He then accompanied her to the cavern; and before dawn he was back again in his tent, courting the slumber and rest he so much needed.

Faithful Humfredo! Night or day he was willing to traverse the mountain passes, hide in its caverns, or crawl across the grasses of the valley, to serve the one he had vowed never to leave until the revenge they sought should be consummated.

CHAPTER VIII.

STEAGER'S REVENGE.

BEFORE daybreak the Comargo rifles had left their rendezvous—all except Steager, and he remained, in the hopes of getting "one shot" at the White Tiger of the Tropics, and to keep the Tigers in check as long as possible.

Tristan had distributed his men in the various mottes of timber scattered around upon the prairie, which mottes seemed as though placed there by the hands of man as fortresses to guard the mountains to the west of them.

"If Steager can get one shot at the Tiger, he will be satisfied," said the brave Liberal, as he looked in the direction of the enemy's stronghold.

All over the valley lay a thin fog, as high above the ground as the stature of a tall man. It rolled in smoke-like wreaths, and twisted in spiral folds, awaiting the coming of the sun to lift it to a high altitude and finally dispel it altogether.

"Steager will not have to wait long. Good soldiers move before the sun can reflect from their steel arms. Ha! they are coming," and he placed his ear to the ground.

There came through the fog a dull, rolling sound, as though muffled in the luxuriant grasses of the prairies; and the quick eyes of Steager saw, under the disturbed fog, horses in columns of fours slowly advancing on Vega motte;

but the heads and shoulders of their riders were still enshrouded in the vail-like fog. In the advance rode Arnaud Boussard, as the bold picket knew the trappings of the blood-ed horse he bestrode, and also the original costume of the rider.

“Steady, Steager; one shot and a sure one, and then you must give them all battle,” and a rifle was poised in the hand of the kneeling Liberal.

The fog no doubt misled the Tigers as to the proximity of the motte, as they continued to advance cautiously.

“Now, now! Aim for his breast, Steager, where his heart is supposed to be.”

Statue-like kneeled Steager. The ominous rifle lay almost level in the palm of his hand, and his gray eye looked through the delicate sight and tipped the bright bead at the end of the gun, and on until it rested upon a silvery button on the left breast of the man who had doomed him to an ignominious death. Only a second it rested there; the finger pressed the trigger; there was a sharp report, the smoke of the rifle curled up and mingled with the fog, and in the distance there was a confused sound, and the fog was stirred as if a gale of wind had troubled its mid-air repose. Then follow in quick succession reports from Steager's pistol, as he threw bullets into the confused mass of horses, men, and whirling fog.

“Steager must go,” and he mounted his horse and galloped in the direction of the nearest motte, at least a league away, to where Tristan and a number of the Rifles were quietly awaiting his appearance.

On nearing Vega motte the order had been given to move slowly and cautiously. At that moment came the report of Steager's rifle, followed by the fall of Boussard to the ground, and the plunging of horses threw the advancing column into confusion. The pistol-shots succeeded, and two of the Tigers, who had dismounted to lift their chief, fell dead at his side. Although a momentary panic existed, they rallied around Boussard, lifted him from the ground, and hurried to the rear, at the same time firing at random in the direction whence the shots had come.

“Water!” said Boussard, faintly. “That cursed bullet has

entered my body; but it will not kill Arnaud Boussard. Strip off this false coat that should have saved my body."

The coat was taken off, and the wound looked for. Only a round, dark bruise immediately over the heart was visible on the body—no other wound. Steager aimed at one of the shining plates. The bullet struck it fair, and Arnaud Boussard still lived. But on the ground, in the cold sleep of death, were two Austrians, their pale faces upturned to the white fog that floated above them as a funeral shroud.

Throwing out skirmishers, they awaited the passing away of the fog, while Boussard was fast recovering from the shock his body had received—an ounce bullet driven from a rifle, at short range.

Soon the sun lifted the fog, and objects in the distance became defined in ghostly characters, and Vega motte, which rested on a swell of ground, showed itself within short pistol range. The skirmishers, on foot, slowly advanced, and took position on the margin of the motte, and there they remained until the eye could see everything under cover of the trees. Fires smoldered in the center of the timber, but no enemy could be seen, when Boussard, fully recovered, at the head of his men rode to the lake where the Liberals had encamped.

Leaving twenty-five men to hold Vega, he pushed on with the remainder of his force to hacienda Santa Luzia. Dismounting, he strode inside the hedge inclosure and advanced to the house, and with his gauntleted hand knocked upon the closed door. No answer came to his summons, only a momentary echo. Knocking louder, a Mexican woman from the rancho, who had been attracted by the cavalcade of armed men, made her appearance.

"Who lives here?" said Boussard.

"Senor Jose Vallejo did live here; but he is dead."

"Where is his beautiful daughter?"

"Gone."

"Where?"

"No one knows. After the death of her father she disappeared from the hacienda, and from that day until now we have not seen her."

"Is the enemy near the hacienda?"

She pointed her finger to the mountain. Boussard smiled, and struck the hilt of his saber against his hand, remarking :

"I should burn this nest, but it will not do to excite and anger these people who live in the rancho, as they may prove my friends in the future. What motte is yonder?" and he extended his hand in the direction of the first one of the cordon of mottes that lay around:

"Vega."

"The one to the left?"

"Galapagos."

"The next?"

"Ladrones."

"And the next?"

"Paraiso."

"A river hems in Paraiso?"

"Yes, senor; a narrow and deep stream."

Mounting his horse, he rode back to Vega motte, formed his column and headed toward Galapagos. On the edge of it could be seen the bright arms of Tristan and his men. Steadily, but cautiously, the Tigers advanced. The Liberals had disappeared. A single shot greeted them, and a soldier fell dead at the side of Boussard. The bugle sounded a charge and with stout hands they drew rein as their horses were spurred on, and sabers shone in the sunshine. Another blast of the bugle, and the column swung around into a line two deep, and plunged into the timber, expecting a volley from out the bushes and trees. But no guns belched forth a deadly welcome. The enemy had fled and taken refuge in Ladrones. The bugle again sounded, and away they went, thundering on to Ladrones, and far ahead of them rode the solitary horseman who had fired the fatal shots. It was Steager.

Ladrones was reached, but no enemy abided there; they had entered the trap that lay open for them at Paraiso. Exultingly Arnaud Boussard headed his men to Paraiso, but a volley from ten rifles warned him that the Liberals were ready to give him battle, and he halted to consider what would be the best mode of attack.

The motte was small, resting in the bend of a narrow river that formed almost a complete circle; and where the waters of the river nearly met, was a slender strip of ground

on which two men could ride abreast, extending at least fifty feet from the motte, entirely bare of timber. All around the edge of the motte the ground ridged up, as if an artificial barrier to the encroachments of the water had been thrown round the deep stream. Oak trees grew thickly inside the inclosure, and the ground was sunk almost on a level with the water in the stream.

On the other side of the stream, where Bousard and his Tigers were in consultation, not one tree grew up to shelter them. It was a bald prairie, and but one little rise in the earth, at the mouth of the entrance to the motte, gave them a place of shelter from the bullets of the Liberals.

"Captain," said Bousard, to a French captain who stood near him, "what I supposed to be a trap for the enemy appears to be a formidable stronghold. They have abundance of water, and the grass is rich and plentiful. If their provisions are short, we can starve them out; but there are their horses—they can eat them."

"Colonel Bousard, with your permission, I will charge them."

"You have it; but it will be certain death and certain failure."

"Surround the place outside of the reach of their rifles; advance upon them from all sides, and when their attention is distracted from this point, I will head fifty men in the narrow opening. We will make an entrance. Then move forward on all sides, swim the river, leap from your horses, scale the embankment, and they are ours."

"Perilous, but good."

In two columns the Tigers commenced to envelop the circle.

"Steager," said Tristan, "what are they going to do?"

"Steager knows. Place thirty men at the entrance—only thirty—and fifty around the embankment. They must reserve their shots until a sure mark presents itself, then fire with their rifles—then with six-shooters. Will you let Steager command the thirty?"

"I will, Steager."

An ominous silence ensued. The Tigers had drawn their line around Paraiso, within long range of the Liberal rifles;

but no sound of gun disturbed the silence that reigned about. Fifty rifles rested upon the circling embankment, and fifty marksmen reclined upon the green turf, awaiting the coming of the enemy.

Steager had left the entrance to Paraiso open. No obstructions—no barricade—were reared to stop the onward plunge of the 'Tigers' horses. The deception was perfect.

A bugle-blast—one as loud and fierce as those blown by the Knights of the Round Table—rose clear and startling in the air, and gallantly rode the fierce Tigers under Boussard to the charge; and from the swell of earth in front of the entrance to the motte rose, like a giant, the fifty men under the French captain.

Simultaneous with the discharge of fifty rifles, they dashed upon the narrow causeway. Ten rifles enfiladed the dashing column of fifty, and tumbled the brave Frenchman and six of his men to the ground, and all were in a confused group. Twenty more guns, ten from each side, hurled death again among them, and the panic was complete, and like frightened cattle, they struggled and fought among themselves to gain the sheltering knoll.

All around the motte the fight raged fiercely, some of the combatants having plunged into the stream and reached the bank, there to fall under the fire from pistols.

Senor Arnaud Boussard, your Tigers got into the lion's den!

The sound from the bugle was as a dismal wail. It called together the remainder of a once gallant band. Stained with blood, they assembled on the prairie, over forty of their number lying dead or wounded within reach of the enemy.

"Captain Tristan, Steager is satisfied. His twenty brave fellows are now avenged."

Gathering up the wounded within their reach, the Tigers, with slow steps retraced their way to Vega motte, and there did all in their power to alleviate the sufferings of their wounded companions.

"We must encamp here until I can send for reinforcements," said Boussard, musingly. "They must be driven from their place of refuge, or I will lose caste as a leader."

CHAPTER IX.

"THOU LAND OF TREMULOUS MUSIC."

ON the day that the desperate conflict took place at Paraiso, Hernando Vidal was seated on cushions in the tent of Arnaud Boussard, listening to Murieta, the Arab woman, as she vividly pictured Bedouin life on the sandy desert.

"Although I am far from it, Senor Vidal, I love it. Its sands are hot, and Christian man will falter where the Arab renews his strength; but upon the margins of these desert wastes are the homes where we revel in delightful pleasures, and listen, night after night, under the palm trees to our poet story-tellers, who delight in the glories of Arabia before the Koran, and after Islamism, the mantle of eternal faith, fell upon all the dwellers in our land. The skies seem softer there, the moon hangs lower, the birds sing more melodiously, the camel bells delight the senses, and the swift dromedary goes by so silently to the desert waste that he resembles a spirit seeking the arid sands for the rest it could not get among the sighing palms."

Her hands were clasped across her knees, and the reflection from the crimson and damask-colored cushions gave to her brown face a burning tinge, and the ruby-like color of the rose rested on either cheek. From her eyes there went out a strange light, as they seemed again to swim in liquid beauty.

"The seas are phosphorescent, and boats glide on their surface as if surrounded by a magnetic circle that causes the water to dance in silver wavelets. When, when, oh, Arabia! thou land of tremulous music, thou land of song and war, of soft breezes and fragrant perfumes! when will I see thee again?"

A shadow fell across the opening of the tent. The prophetic stood before them. Murieta uttered a cry of delight as she sprung forward and grasped the hand of Marta.

"Be seated," she said, "thou reader of the future, and tell us more—yes, more of the life that awaits us."

Marta seated herself upon a cushion extended to her, and looked keenly at Murieta, saying :

"Daughter, your thoughts have been far from here."

"Yes; many—very many leagues."

"Far across the waters where the mosques, with their domes and minarets, point skyward—to Arabia."

"Yes, to Arabia," and she sighed as her mind again reverted to her home.

"If the Arab woman would hear more of her future life, let her visit the home where the prophetess conjures up the spirits of the past, and from them gains inspiration so that she has power to unfold the doors of the future, and look down its vista of gloom and darkness. Will she come?"

Murieta hesitated, looking at Vidal inquiringly.

"What shall I say, Senor Vidal? I would dare any thing to see further into the future that is now so promising."

"I will accompany you if she will not object," said Vidal.

"The prophetess of the mountain does not object, as the future holds much in store for you."

"Then I will visit your home, woman of inspiration."

"Meet me when the mission bell sounds the hour of twelve, at the old stone cross at the eastern base of the mountain;" saying which she arose from her sitting posture and, with measured steps, left the tent.

"Gone!" said Murieta, "thou prophetess of good tidings."

"Be ready for the journey, Senora Boussard," said Vidal. "We will visit the cross, mounted. I will take my servant along."

"I will be prepared for the journey at the exact time."

Vidal bowed as he left the marquee, went to his own tent, called for Humfredo, and instructed him of what would transpire, and to have their horses ready before the hour of twelve.

Eagerly Murieta mounted her horse, and before the hour of twelve, she, Vidal and Humfredo, rode down the mountain and took their way to the stone cross designated by Marta. They reached it before the appointed time, as the prophetess was not there. They had not long to wait, for soon the mis-

sion bell chimed the hour of twelve. Its strokes had not ceased to sound before Marta stood before them.

"Follow!" she said.

They followed until a secret place for the three animals was found, when they were tethered and left in charge of Humfredo. But the group were hardly out of sight before he sped through the chaparral, circled around them and entered the cavern.

"Your eyes must be bound," said Marta, addressing Vidal and Murieta.

They submitted to the operation, and after walking a short distance, entered the mountain side. The door closed silently behind them. Marta lighted a taper, took the bandages from the eyes of Murieta and Vidal, and led the way to the Aztec chapel and the chamber of the crested serpent. The room was brilliantly lighted, and the effect upon Murieta was wonderful. She tightly grasped the arm of Vidal, exclaiming:

"Can this be an abode of mortals; or is it a home of supernatural beings? How sublimely beautiful! How radiantly dazzling!"

At that moment the music echoed through the chamber and cavern with all its varied effect; now swelling high and grand; now weird and solemn; now wild and fierce; and again plaintive and wailing.

Marta appeared upon the altar in a robe dark as ebony, yet blazing with the glowing light emitted by the fire-fly, which insects she had confined in little gauze pouches, extending from feet to shoulders. Upon her head was a wreath that resembled the nopal, and surmounting it was a golden representation of an eagle in the act of alighting.

The scene, by its originality and vividness, astonished even Vidal; and Murieta, her naturally wild senses captivated, and her eyes dazzled with the brilliant scene, sank upon her knees in wonder and amazement.

"Woman, thou and Arnaud Boussard are born to rule. The prophetess of the mountain looks into futurity and sees thee upon a throne, surrounded by all the noble in the land. The nations of the earth recognize thee as sovereigns, and all the cathedrals in the nation are vocal with music to thy

praise. Ships laden with the wealth of oriental seas bring thee silks, sandal-wood, gums, sweet-smelling oils and spices; jewels and precious stones are laid at thy feet, and gold and silver are paid thee as tribute. The votaries of learning, science and art bow to thee and call thee great; the poet dedicates to thee the loftiest verse, and the genius of song gives utterance to it in inspiring tones. Born great, so shall ye live. The king of serpents, crested as becomes a monarch, bows to thee."

As she ceased speaking the music again sounded through the cave, and the head of the Crested Serpent protruded from the rocks.

"See! see!" exclaimed Murieta, as she clung to the arm of Vidal; "a serpent!"

It waved its crested head to and fro, apparently keeping time to the music that still reverberated through the cavern, then slowly disappeared from sight.

"The prophetess of the mountain has spoken. Once more will she look into the future of the woman of Arabia and the White Tiger of the Tropics. Once again will she lift the veil that stands before the living present and the unborn future. Once more will she tell them of the greatness in store for them, then she will consult the book of prophecies and read the stars for new and lofty destinies."

Leaving the altar upon which she had been standing, she appeared shortly after with her long staff, and led the way to the mouth of the cavern. Here again the process of binding was gone through with. They passed from the mountain, walked leisurely along, and finally reached the horses—Hunfredo being with them.

Few words were spoken—only adieus, and Murieta, Vidal and Hunfredo, mounting, rode toward the Tigers' camp.

"Is she not a strange woman?" questioned Vidal.

"There is surely a connecting link between her and the spirit land; else why all this knowledge of the past and future? She speaks like one inspired, and her weird acts aroused from the rocks a serpent that perhaps has dwelt there for ages."

"And on its head a crown."

"Ay! it was crowned like a monarch."

Riding up the mountain, the horses were given into the care of Humfredo; and, after bidding each other good-night, Murieta and Vidal retired to their respective tents—one to dream of oriental life on the shores of the Red Sea, and the other to ponder over the terrible retribution that was so close at hand.

Morning brought tidings of the defeat of the Tigers the day before, and the wounded were scattered throughout the encampment.

Two hundred more men, with two mountain howitzers, marched away from the Tiger camp to Vega, there to join themselves to the dispirited and broken command of Arnaud Boussard.

"Now I will crush these arrogant Liberals, who butchered my men. Curses on that Steager; *his* mind devised the ruse, I know."

It was late in the day before the Tigers commenced their march for Paraiso, and in the north and north-west were ominous signs that a norther was concentrating its strength to gallop down upon them.

Cautiously the Tigers approached Galapagos; then with equal caution the Ladrones, whence the motte, where the fatal fight of the day before took place, could be distinctly seen.

Skirmishers advanced upon all sides, and gradually the forces closed in. The place was to be taken by storm. During all this preparation not an enemy had been seen, and it would not do to charge them without drawing a portion of their fire. Again, the charge was to be made on the narrow causeway. Fifty picked men galloped down upon it, and across and into Paraiso. No gun answered their headlong charge. The enemy had fled. Three graves inside the inclosure told the story of their loss in the late fight, while all around the motte were the dead bodies of the Tigers who had fought so gallantly. Gathering up their remains, they consigned them to rude graves, when a scout was sent in pursuit of the Liberals, and Boussard, with the remainder, returned, sullen and angry, to the mountain encampment.

A norther, one of those tempestuous northers of the fall season, darkened the sky, and drove the rain in long slants to

the earth. Through this wind and rain the Comargo rifles marched along the banks of the Tula, seeking a safe passage, feeling satisfied that Boussard, stinging with mortification at his defeat, would pursue them. At length they crossed the stream, and as they rode way, saw upon the other bank the Tigers. Already the stream was so swollen as to be unsafe. Firing a few shots, they retraced their steps, knowing that further pursuit would be useless.

CHAPTER X.

J. HENRY TODDLES.

TEN leagues from where Captain Tristan crossed the Tula, with the Tigers in close pursuit, in the direction of Cape Roxo, five hundred Liberal cavalry, under command of Colonel Pedro Gonzales, were encamped in a lagoon awaiting information from Captain Tristan's scout.

Like all camps where danger is not immediate, the soldiers were enjoying themselves in almost every conceivable way—target-shooting, cock-fighting, monte, athletic sports, and the laughter-provoking sport of riding “pitching” horses. Notwithstanding the scene of fun, frolic, and uninterrupted pleasure, the rules of discipline were strictly observed. The road leading to the Tula was picketed by a large force, and videttes were upon every road and trail. Around the camp, and within sight of the encampment, were the camp-guards, and horses were tethered along the edge of the lagoon and wherever the herbage was the most nutritious and plentiful.

The tents of this body of prairie and mountain scouts were of the small field kind, so constructed that they could be taken to pieces in a few minutes' notice and distributed among the various members of a mess to be strapped behind their saddles till again wanted for use.

Close to the lagoon a tent of more pretentious appearance reared itself in the morning sun, proving that the commander

of the troop of horse, Pedro Gonzales, occupied it, as near by he stood in conversation with a personage who bore a striking resemblance to the American frontier ranger who can be found in almost any portion of Mexico.

Colonel Gonzales was a tall, martial-looking individual of quiet demeanor, thin visage, black hair and eyes, complexion brown, and no marks of countenance that would denote special traits of character—except decision and soldierly courage, which is inherent in the educated gentleman. The personage with whom Colonel Gonzales was in close conversation was a man not over five feet six inches in height, hair red and cut close to the scalp, face freckled and broad, a nose like an eagle's beak—so thin that the sun shone through it, neck thick and set upon shoulders broad and round, and legs and arms showing great muscular development. His eyes were a full gray, small and sunk far into his head, and heavy red eyebrows overhung them.

"Then you would like to make an individual scout in search of Tristan and the Comargo rifles, Toddles?" said Gonzales.

"I would, or my name's not J. Henry Toddles," replied the party last described, as he surveyed his person with more than special attention, having recently incased his muscular body in a new suit of buck-skin.

"Toddles, you can go."

"You see, they have been circumvented. Them's my senterment. Stagger got his blood up and tried to warm 'em—then there were a difficulty and some one's been hurt."

"I will trust to your discretion, Toddles. Make your way over the Tula and visit Vega motte. When there, look for marks of encampment and shape your actions from whatever you may learn there."

"Look for sign at Veger?" said Toddles, abstractedly, as he moved slowly away. "I like this—sorter like business. Haven't had a crack at a greaser nigh onter three weeks. Have to hunt up Tristy and Stagger. Will find 'em ef they are in Mexico."

J. Henry Toddles commenced preparations for his solitary scout, filling his sack with jerked beef and venison, ground

coffee and hard biscuits, examining his rifle and six-shooter, hunting-knife and ammunition.

Shortly after this Toddles made his appearance before the tent of Colonel Gonzales, mounted on a pony, almost diminutive, covered with shaggy hair.

"I am here to say that J. Henry Toddles and animil is ready to light out, and that *I* am Toddles," saying which he laughed in a chuckling manner, as though he had perpetrated a deep joke on J. Henry Toddles.

"Be wary, Toddles," said Gonzales.

"I shall be wary careful of myself and this animil," he answered, and again the good-natured laugh followed the supposed joke. Suddenly he looked overhead, and directed his attention to a mass of clouds that hung darkly in the north.

"What do you see, Toddles?" Are you reading your fate in the clouds?"

"Pigins!" he answered.

"Pigeons?"

"Yes, pigins; they're goin' to the mountains; and I'm goin' to the mountains, too."

Gonzales looked up in the direction the eyes of Toddles designated, and between the clouds and earth were long rows of these migratory birds, winging their flight in the direction of the Sierra Madre. As he gazed upon them, Toddles had taken his departure, paying no attention to the various shouts and humorous expressions directed toward him as he rode through the encampment.

"J. Henry Toddles!" said Gonzales, while a smile overspread his face. "What a character. Just the opposite to the dignified Steager, and yet brave and cunning."

Toddles, while on his mission, as courier did not travel the main road, but followed trails that ran parallel with it, but from which point his little eyes could see all persons making their appearance on the prairie. On the morning of the second day after his departure from camp, as he was about to emerge from a motte of timber, he saw, advancing along the main road, a body of armed men. Keeping under the shadow of the timber, he took a position in a clump of *mesquite* and cactus, close to the road, to await the coming of the mounted

men in the distance. In a short time the advance guard rode within a few steps of the clump of cactus, and were aroused from a deep reverie that seemed to pervade them all, by the single word:

"Stagger!" and from cover emerged the scouting party of one, who was greeted in return by a reply equally as laconic: "Toddles!" and the advance guard gathered around Toddles, greeting him with delight, all of which he received with imperturbable gravity.

"Stagger, you have been sent for."

"Steager!" returned the gallant soldier, "not Stag-ger."

"Well, you have been sent for. Them's the latest sentiments of the colonel. There are business to be done and Greasers to be circumvented."

By this time Tristan and the main body had come up, and Toddles delivered his orders in a characteristic manner.

That evening they reached the main camp and were greeted with wild shouts until the lessened number of the Comargo rifles was noticed, when they ceased, and eager questions were asked about the adventures of the scouting party.

In front of Gonzales' tent, after dark, were gathered Gonzales, Tristan, and Steager, and Toddles, sitting around a blazing fire, smoking cigarettes and pipes. The conversation was upon the adventures of the Comargo rifles, and the narrow escape of Steager.

"We have friends, then, inside the camp of the enemy?" said Gonzales, after Steager had related the manner of his escape.

"Yes; Steager knows it."

The enemy must be routed from the mountain," said Tristan. "It is a stronghold we ought to possess; so I think, colonel, we should move to the cordon of mottes and occupy them, and make that our head-quarters."

"True, Captain Tristan. Could not their lines be entered by strategy, and a description of their stronghold gained?"

"Steager has been in, and can go in again," spoke Steager, as he blew smoke around his head from a delicately-tinted pipe.

"In what capacity could you enter, Steager?" said Gonzales.

"Peddlers!" said a voice, and a burst of laughter followed, as it came from Toddles. "Staggers and J. Henry Toddles can circumvent them as peddlers."

"Are you conversant with the business of these desultory people, Toddles?" inquired Tristan.

"Yes; I were a peddler nigh onto four years, in the State of Mississippi, where I wasn't born nor educated. . . If it hadn't been for a accident and act of divine Providence, Toddles would, even to this late day, be peddlin' ribbons, pins, ha'r-pins, and other extravagances as people will have in the cotton-bottoms of old Mississippi."

"What was the nature of the accident that deprived the good people of Mississippi of your honest trade, Toddles?"

"Fell in a river."

"In a river."

"Yes; lost my pack, got bu'sted, and couldn't replenish. Been out here ever sence, killin' deer and Greasers. The firm name were J. Henry Toddles, Tishomingy county, j'inin' McNairy."

"Steager will enter the camp of the Tigers, and Toddles will go with him. Toddles will be the peddler, and Steager the artist."

"Good, Stagger!" said Toddles, and his small eyes twinkled with undisguised pleasure.

"S-t-e-a-g-e-r, Toddles," quickly returned Steager, as a look of vexation and disgust was plainly visible on his face.

It was decided that Steager and Toddles should enter the 'Tigers' stronghold in the widely-different capacities of artist and peddler—one to take observations of the men as he disposed of his merchandise, and the other to ply his art for the gratification of the White Tiger of the Tropics, and at the same time sketch the Tiger camp and its weakest points.

Toddles was brave and reliable. Although his brain was not stored with much book-learning, he had a knowledge of the world and an insight into the characters of men that enabled him to push his way along in the strife of life with apparent ease. Genial and brimful of good humor, he was a favorite in the camp; courageous and steadfast, he was reliable in times of danger. The name Toddles had been the source of much amusement, and with the J. Henry attached, as applied

in the dry, quaint style of Toddles himself, was suggestive of broad smiles and rousing laughter.

The next morning, before the day had dawned, the camp of the Liberals was in a bustle, and all were engaged making preparations for the intended march, or preparing for the morning meal.

Before the morning had far advanced, the Liberals were in the saddle, and the bugle sounded the advance. It was the march of men who loved republican Mexico, although battered and torn for years with internal strife, better than Imperial gold. They were patriots, ardent and bold, and had sworn never to lay down their arms until the usurper had been driven forth. They were a little band, yet rode forward to give battle to the desperadoes of the Imperial army, the ferocious Tigers, the outpost of the usurper, crouching on a mountain top, smarting from their late wounds.

All that day, they traveled rapidly forward, crossed the Tula, and on the evening of the next day swept around Paliso and on past Ladrones and Galapagos to Tiger motte.

That night the camp-fires of the Liberals burned brightly, throwing fantastic lights among the branches of the oaks overhead, and across the small lake in the middle of the motte. They were close to the enemy they hated—an enemy who had suffered disastrous defeat at the hands of a company of their command, and that night they would have willingly marched up the mountain to give them battle.

The first light of morning found Steager and Toddles on their feet, in active preparation for their adventure.

Tristan, Gonzales, Steager, and Toddles, notwithstanding the danger and importance of the undertaking, were full of jollity; and as Tristan and Gonzales viewed the two disguised men before them they were convulsed with laughter.

Toddles was stripped of his newly-acquired buck-skin suit, and attired in one of black; his hair was cropped close, and the scalp carefully covered with a black wig, while long, dark whiskers graced his chin. Upon his head rested a dark beaver hat, apparently the worse for past wear, and his eyes peeped through green goggles, the whole costume giving him the appearance of a peddler who had wandered up and down the earth for years in this precarious business.

Mounted on his pony, with packs slung across his saddle-bow, he presented a picture that was at once melancholy and irresistible. Shouts of laughter greeted him on all sides as he rode among the brave Liberals in his original way.

Steager's locks were somewhat shorn, and had gone through a curling process that caused them to cling to his head, making his metamorphose complete. But to add to the deception, his mustache, although giving to his face a grand appearance, had to succumb to shears and razor. Then a liquid changed his face to a deep-brown color. His attire was also altered, and when mounted upon his horse, in the character of an artist, with sketch-book under arm, the warlike demeanor of the gallant Steager had vanished. He was beyond recognition, and would certainly pass for one of those geniuses who, in the advancement of art, had left the peaceful abodes of cities, and gone among the scenes of war and its attendant dangers.

"Colonel, this is like goin' back on the scoutin' and fightin', and gettin back into the old harness. But any thing to circumvent 'em, Stagger, and—"

"Steager—Steager, Toddles!" exclaimed the pseudo artist, as he continued eating the juicy beef that the colonel had had served at his own table.

"Well, then, Staggers," and Toddles relapsed into a state of seeming obliviousness, as he discussed the merits of a bone.

Breakfast ended, and Toddles and Steager, each armed with a brace of derringer pistols, mounted their horses, bade adieu to the command, left the encampment, and directed their course toward hacienda Santa Luzia, where they proposed remaining until the day was further advanced, so that they would be able to reach the Tigers' stronghold before the sun reached the meridian.

CHAPTER XI.

A FIGHT.

“Camel bells are tinkling soft,
By the Red Sea's shore;
Stars are burning up aloft,
On the ebony floor.”

THESE words were sung by Murieta, as she sat on cushions in her tent, and the harp sounded an enchanting accompaniment. Boussard reclined opposite her, and looked with undisguised admiration upon the face of the woman, whose wild, ungovernable spirit was as destructive and restless as his own.

“So, Murieta, when the disasters of Paraiso were overwhelming me and my command, you were consulting the weird prophetess in her ghostly caverns in the recess of the mountains,” said Boussard, as Murieta ceased singing.

“I did, Arnaud. Senor Vidal accompanied me. It was a sight I shall never forget. Her words of prophecy were as fervent as though they had been pent up for years, and at last found an avenue of escape. Arnaud,” and she lowered her voice almost to a whisper, “we are destined to rule. It is so recorded in the book of prophecy.”

“The prophecy shall be fulfilled.”

“On the night that I visited the cavern of the prophetess, I saw our splendors and greatness mirrored in dreams, so vividly that I see them now.”

“A lake, the shores of which were inlaid with shells, lay in placid beauty under the shadows of stately trees, and a palace, built of marble of many colors, rested embowered in deeper shadows made by the palm, the orange, the fig, the magnolia, and trees of spreading branches and stately heights, and trailing vines.

“A delicate perfume pervaded the atmosphere; and the ground was laden with fruits representing all climes, and exotics from Oriental fields, and spices, and flowers, sweet with

dews that sparkled as precious diamonds. And the wind was soft, and bore upon its fanning current strains of music from harp and lute, and all instruments the sounds of which, by touch of skillful hands, make the soul grow sorrowful by their tender melodies.

"And in the lake, that lay unruffled in the shadows of trees and amber light of the sinking sun, gondolas, like those of Venice, were passing to and fro, and the oars, in their silver fastenings, gleamed with the fascinating brightness of the whirling cimeter of the warlike Mameluke—and the soft voices of representatives of many peoples of the earth floated over the water and died in the enamored distance. The palace was our home, its base being washed by the waters of the beautiful lake. Through its center ran a nave, supported by pillars carved in antique shapes; and niches, lined with gold and pearl, sheltered statues of the fabled gods. The genius of architecture had been lavish upon it from base to dome, and it seemed to slumber in an atmosphere of tropical quietude.

"In the midst of all this white, stately beauty, reposed upon an Imperial couch, Arnaud Boussard, and garlands of roses were streaming around his head. By his side, watching his face, and trying to read the current of his thoughts, as his bosom rose and fell in gentle respirations, sat Murieta, the daughter of a Sheik."

Murieta paused, and her animated face, made darker by a flush of red, grew still darker. She resumed.

"But the scene changed. Out from the garlands of roses a serpent, crowned as a monarch, drew its length. It encircled your form in its deadly folds—a scream broke from my lips, and—I awoke."

"Truly a wonderful dream," said Boussard, as he dwelt delighted on her eloquent words, which she delivered with the grace and dramatic effect of an Arab story-teller, "but a tragic ending."

"If we believe that the first portion of this dream foretells our coming greatness, as predicted by the prophetess of the mountain, must we not believe the later portion to predict our downfall while at the apex of our glory?"

"Let us but reach the power that the splendors of the

dream give token of, and I will guard it with such jealous care that no snake can creep in among the roses."

Senor Vidal looked into the tent, saying :

"Senor Boussard, two strange men are seeking admission from the guards. I have ordered their detention. What shall be done with them?"

"Bring them in."

After a slight delay Vidal returned with Toddles and Steager. Boussard emerged from the tent, and his searching glance went swiftly over the spies, and finally rested on Toddles.

"Who are you; and your business?"

"I am J. Henry Toddles, a American and a peddler. What are in this pack can't be circumvented by any other stock on this side of the Mississippi, and—"

"Stop! I am to understand that you are a peddler and wish to dispose of your goods? Guard, conduct him to the edge of the encampment and leave him to the mercy of the Tigers," said Boussard.

"Will J. Henry Toddles receive the pertection as are generally given peddlers which are of the first class?"

"You must take care of yourself."

"Toddles yer are in for it. There'll be war or my name are not J. Henry Toddles," saying which Toddles was escorted to his field of operations.

"What is your business?" said Boussard, turning to disguised Steager.

"An artist—a draughtsman. Come to sketch scenes of the encampment of the greatest soldier of the Imperial army."

Boussard smiled.

"Would it be soldier-like for me to permit you to take sketches of my stronghold? Yet I fear not to let my enemies make a personal inspection of every inch of the mountain top. Ten thousand men can not take me before I would receive relief. Murieta, he shall hear you tell your dream, and he shall sketch it—all save the latter portion. Can you draw a palace if painted to you in language that sounds like a song?"

"Yes; every pillar, every arch, and every niche."

"Where did you acquire a knowledge of this art?"

"In Europe."

"Have you practiced it in this country?"

"In Brazil and the United States."

And the artist, encouraged by their attention and evident interest, gave from his store of experience and observation, a very attractive narrative, which continued for some minutes, when a prolonged yell, from the camp outside, and the report of two pistol-shots caused all in the marquee to spring to their feet and rush to the opening.

To explain the cause of this unlooked-for interruption we must follow Toddles in his adventures.

"A peddler!" was the unceremonious introduction of Toddles to the Tigers of the mountains, who were enjoying themselves as best they could.

About forty of these precious animals gathered around devoted Toddles, who spread his pack and commenced to expatiate upon the usefulness and value of the articles he offered for sale.

"That? The price of that? That's valuable; cost me a Spanish dollar, or my name's not Toddles. Will take a dollar and ten cents for it. That knife? It are wery valuable and can't be circumvented by any other knife as can be perduced in this camp," and as he glibly talked on, one article at a time was manipulated by the Tigers, until the lynx eyes of Toddles discovered it, and forgetting the actual position he occupied—that of spy instead of peddler—he took a stolen knife from the pocket of a burly soldier, amidst roars of laughter.

"Ef the colonel don't pertect J. Henry Toddles, why he will be compelled to pertect himself. There are a way to stop this stealin', and Toddles can do it."

"You can, can you?" sneered the burly individual who had committed the theft, and who felt mortified at detection.

"Yes, Toddles can. I, Toddles, of the firm of J. Henry Toddles, Tishomingy county, j'inin' McNairy, can do it."

This was too much for the enraged Tiger, and he kicked Toddles' pack and scattered its contents over the ground, exclaiming:

"You old goggle-eyed whelp; I will pound the life out of you."

"Yer will not. Toddles are not goin' to let you do it, you cowardly varmint," and as the Tiger rushed upon him, he shot his arm straight out, and the burly form fell to the earth.

There was a yell of exultation, as the bully had few actual friends. Recovering his feet, he again rushed at Toddles, and again was dealt a blow that hurled him heavily upon his back. At the third attempt the Tiger was more successful, closed in upon Toddles, seized him by the long whiskers, and with a strong wrench, tore both whiskers and wig from Toddles' face and head. A look of consternation pervaded the faces of the before amused throng as they looked upon the closely-shorn head of Toddles; then a fierce yell broke from them, and they closed in upon him. Drawing a pistol, Toddles shot the first one dead, and dashed through the opening cleared for him. On through the camp he went, until a guard presented a gun at his breast. Only a moment, and his other pistol spoke in loud tones, and the guard fell back a corpse. Snatching the dead man's pistol, he fled on toward the center of the mountain, with at least one hundred men in pursuit. On through the *mesquite* bushes, chaparral, cactus, over rocks and across ravines, sped J. Henry Toddles, with a fierce, bloodthirsty pack of Tigers in close pursuit. He was fast wearying, although a man of great endurance, and determined to make a stand.

"I have done it this time, and the firm of J. Henry Toddles has again met with a accident," he ejaculated, as he breathed hard and wiped the perspiration from his face. "Here's one of the warments, and Toddles will warm his hide," and taking aim with the six-shooter taken from the dead Imperialist, he fired, and one of his pursuers sunk to the earth.

Speeding to the side of his dead foe, he also secured his pistol, and returned to cover among the rocks, just as others of his pursuers came upon the dead body of their companion.

"And I'll just pepper you," said Toddles and one more, from a group of four, bit the dust.

"Better'n a battle. I commence to like this. Toddles will just hand *you* one," and another one fell, as the balance drew back.

The position of Toddles was becoming precarious, as his

pursuers were rapidly arriving and arranging their plans for his capture, and before many minutes had elapsed they were surrounding Toddles in his rocky stronghold. Huge rocks lay piled one upon another, old and moss-covered, making avenues only broad enough for one to traverse. Taking a position upon a rock smaller than those surrounding it, he had a good view of his enemies, as they made preparations to close in upon him.

"Takin' a view of the field, I am convinced of the startlin' fact that we are gone up, Toddles. Well, I'll send a settler after you," said Toddles, as he delivered a shot, at short range, at a Tiger who was letting himself down from a high rock. "As good a shot as has been made to-day. Went down faster'n he expected. And here they come! What is to be done, J. Henry Toddles?"

The rock on which he had been standing raised just as he delivered another truthful shot, and Toddles lost his balance and was compelled to leap to the ground.

Deliverance had come, and Marta, the high priestess, stood before him.

"Leap in! Do not hesitate!" she said, in a low tone.

"You bet," and Toddles was swallowed up in the mountain.

"Silence!" said Marta, as the rock fell back to its old place, "and follow me," and with lighted taper in hand she led the way to the Aztec chapel.

"My name's not Toddles if yer ain't the old lady I saw at Loozy ranch," exclaimed the astonished Toddles.

"I am the woman you conversed with this morning. Seeing through your disguises I feared for your safety, and so came to the cavern, thinking I might be of some use to you. I heard the firing overhead and knew that the Tigers were after an enemy, and their enemies are my friends."

"Bravo!" exultingly exclaimed Toddles, as he saw that he had fallen into the power of a friend.

"Your comrade will suffer," said Marta, after Toddles explained how the exposure took place.

"I feel sorry. Stagger are in a tight fix, and I can't congratulate him on his siterwation. He's always gittin' himself into trouble. Stagger are not the manager as Toddles

is. I can say that and not injure the reputation of Stagger. He's headstrong, wery headstrong."

"Something must be done for his delivery," said Marta.

Overhead the search after Toddles was continued without abatement. Fired with the thought that an enemy had entered their encampment in disguise, whipped, in fair fight the bully of the Tigers, and killed a number of their men outright, was too much for the nature of Tigers. Over rocks and under rocks they continued their search, their numbers becoming augmented every few minutes until, at last, one-half of the regiment was in pursuit of the loquacious and brave, though indiscreet Toddles, who was far beneath them, quietly seated, discussing the best method of freeing Steager from the grasp of the infuriated Tigers.

The search was continued far into the night, and only ceased when orders reached them to place a strong guard around the place and return to the encampment. Obeying orders, they drew their double lines close in around the spot where Toddles was last seen, built huge fires, that lighted up the grim old rocks upon which J. Henry Toddles had so lately battled valiantly and with tragic effect.

As night closed in upon the mountain, Marta and Toddles stole from the base—one destined to Santa Luzia, and the other to the Liberal camp at Vega motte.

CHAPTER XII.

A WOMAN'S FOOTPRINTS.

As Toddles made his appearance in the Liberal encampment at Vega, on foot, misgivings entered the minds of Gonzales and Tristan. They saw him slowly wending his way among the camp-fires, stripped of his peddler disguise—or, at least, that portion which had covered his face and head, and they felt certain that he had met with some mishap. At length Toddles arrived at their camp fire, apparently worn

and fatigued, and his clothing was torn into shreds during his wild flight on the top of the mountain.

"Toddles, where is Steager?" asked Gonzales.

"Colonel, it were impossible for me to say. He may, peradventure, be dead. I am here, thank Providence, sound; but my animal are left—so are Stagger."

He then detailed, as minutely as he could, all the circumstances relating to his fight and flight and final deliverance. When he reached that portion where he described the ground as opening when he was hard pressed, an incredulous smile stole over the face of Gonzales. Toddles saw it. His freckled face reddened and his little eyes snapped with irritation.

"Colonel, did you ever know Toddles to *lie*? No, yer never did; and yer never will. *I say*, a rock rolled up, a old woman who lives at Luzia ranch came out from a hole under the rock, and said: 'Git in!' and Toddles got in. The old woman followed. Afterwards she led me down more'n a hundred feet where there were a room that looked like a circus performer—covered with spangles. Of course, I felt circumwented. We had a sociable talk together, then Toddles and she went down a pair of stairs as windin' as the spider's, then out of a door in the mountain-side, and Toddles were a free man. Them's my senterment, and true."

"Colonel, what Toddies has related to you is no fiction. A cavern does exist under the mountain. It can be entered at the eastern base and the exit is on the mountain-top, where, luckily, Toddles made his brave stand against the Tigers. The woman who unfolded the mysteries of the cavern to Toddles is named Marta, and she lives at hacienda Santa Luzia. Her son is now in the encampment of the enemy. I did not feel at liberty to tell you of this cavern, but it was intended that our men should enter the stronghold of the White Tiger of the Tropics through this avenue whenever our friends on the mountain would lead the way."

"Captain Tristan, this is truly providential. Once secretly upon the mountain-top, we will scatter the Tigers like chaff. Victory will be certain, and our country rid of Arnaud Bous-sard and his followers."

"But, Colonel Gonzales, faithful Steager is in the hands of

Boussard, and I fear will suffer death—if not dead already. It is unfortunate—but the fortune of war. His death at the hands of the enemy would be justified by the strict rules of war.”

“He was certainly a spy, and will surely suffer death, unless rescued. As we are now situated, it is impossible to assist him. To now advance upon the Tigers, would endanger our chances of final success, and do Steager no good.”

“Let us trust that the same agency that delivered him before will set him free again.”

We will now return to Steager, whom we left personating the character of an artist.

The shouts and shots forewarned Steager that Toddles had been entrapped, and that he was making a gallant resistance.

“Treachery!” exclaimed Boussard, as he grasped his pistol and leveled it at the head of Steager. “Move one step from the position you are in and you are a dead man. Guards!”

Two guards stepped to the tent.

“Secure this man and bind him tight.”

Quickly the guards obeyed the orders of Boussard, and Steager’s hands were pinioned behind him.

By this time the whole encampment was in an uproar, and in full chase after Toddles. Speedily news came to Boussard of the peddler’s disguise and the manner of its discovery.

“This is a deep-laid plan for our destruction.”

Walking to Steager, he lifted that individual’s hat, and took hold of his hair, saying:

“Not false,” then looked intently into his face. “By Mohammed, *Steager!*”

“You have again caught Steager.”

“Ha, ha! Why, I would rather have you a prisoner than the whole of the crew that fought me at Paraiso.”

“And whipped you at Paraiso,” retorted Steager.

“Terribly. But my bold artist, who interested me so much, and who was to have painted my palace from language, you can have an opportunity of painting your scaffold. To-night we will catch that vile peddler, then you can witness an

artistic hanging, after which you will be strangled in a style that will be truly entertaining."

"You are a barbarian."

"And you are a spy."

"You are bloodthirsty."

"I will be justified in taking life and tossing your body down the precipice."

"And you will not lose the advantage of the justification."

"That I will not."

"You are truthfully called the White Tiger of the Tropics."

"I won the title by actions in battle on the plains of Arabia."

"You won it because your heart is the heart of the tiger, that would lap the blood of infants."

"Curse you!" he almost shrieked; "you shall die a death of torture."

"Steager's body may die, but his soul shall live immortal."

"Chain him, and guard him well. If he escapes I will hurl you down the mountain side, as sure as the sun shines from the west."

He was aroused, and capable of any sudden act of bloodshed and cruelty. The steel of hate had entered his heart, and the blood of the tiger was coursing through his veins.

"Colonel Vidal," said Boussard, "what news of the fugitive spy?"

"He has killed some of our men, and is yet hid among the rocks."

"Place a heavy guard around the rocks and order the balance of the men to camp. We may have need of them. This spying is an arrow from the strong bow of the enemy."

"Your orders shall be obeyed," said Vidal, as he mounted his horse and rode away, followed by Humfredo.

Humfredo argued that the peddler had escaped through the instrumentality of his mother. That she knew of the entrance of the spies, and being in the cave when the firing took place above, conjectured that the Liberals were in trouble, and moved the stone door just when the peddler reached that point; and

that he, to save his life, stepped inside, and afterward was let out by Marta at the base of the mountain.

"So you think he is free, Humfredo?"

"I do. The men in pursuit of him point to the exact stone that conceals the entrance to the cavern as the one he leaped from when the final charge was made."

"Then he is safe among his companions by this time. But the other unfortunate man will suffer unless we can rescue him."

"We can do it," said Humfredo, "if he is not executed to-morrow."

Placing the guard around the rocks, Vidal led back to camp the remainder of the Tigers, after which he repaired to the tent of Boussard.

"Your orders have been executed. If the spy remains among the rocks we will have him to-morrow at sunrise."

"Double the guards to-night, Colonel Vidal. The enemy is lurking around, as the genius that directs them is now our prisoner."

"Whom?"

"Steager."

"I am astonished!"

"And I."

"Go to the tent and talk to him. He provoked me to madness, and I felt as though I would be compelled to thrust my sword through his body."

Vidal went to the tent where lay Steager, manacled. Lighting a taper, he gazed at the prostrate form of the bold Liberal.

"Caught again," said Vidal.

"Again in the net," was the response.

"Unfortunate. All I ask of you is silence. Do not provoke Boussard, as he is capable of any rash deed. Where are the Liberals encamped?"

"At Vega."

"How strong?"

"Over five hundred gallant men."

"That is sufficient for our purpose."

"Once on the mountain and they will drive these vile dogs over its sides. Did they catch Toddles?"

"He has escaped."

"Steager is satisfied."

"Remember, Senor Steager, keep a seal upon your tongue to-morrow, and to-morrow night you will again be free."

No sleep visited the eyes of Steager that night. His mind was racked with conflicting emotions, and the manacles he wore chafed and heated his limbs, and hourly the vigilant guards would look in upon him, remembering the threat of the White Tiger of the Tropics, and the fate of the other guards.

Glad was Steager when daylight shone through the opening of his tent, as he was anxious to learn the final fate of reckless Toddles.

As the morning advanced the bugle sounded its merry peals, and as its echoes died away, he caught on his ear another bugle-sound, faintly blowing. No one heard it in the camp but Steager. Its faint notes came from Vega motte, telling the captive that his companions-in-arms were not far away, and that what the sword and stout arms could do for his release would surely be done.

The relief guard came on, and new faces looked into his tent.

"How is the artist-spy?" said a shaggy headed Austrian, as that portion of his body was inserted through the door of the tent.

Steager, under ordinary circumstances, would have disdained a reply; but he was anxious to learn the result of the night-guard around the hiding-place of Toddles.

"He feels sore," said Steager. "The chains chafe his limbs."

The guard's mouth opened in a broad grin, and he said, in an undertone, as if talking to his friends outside:

"A rope will chafe his neck before this day passes away, or I don't know the temper of Boussard. "Your friend," and he directed his conversation to Steager, "is safe."

"What do you mean by safe?"

"The spirits of the mountain flew to the tops of the trees with him in their arms, or the devil opened the mountain for him."

"Was he not captured?"

"Captured? We thought he was ours, and had deter-

mined to roast him alive as we did a Mexican on the other mountain; but when we closed in this morning the peddler was provokingly *non est*—gone—no footprints; yes, one footprint—a woman's—in the clay soil near the edge of a huge rock. Perhaps he turned into an angel—all angels are pictured as women—and is sailing around about our heads; at least that's what some of the Tigers think. Others ridicule the idea, and say that a fellow like him would be more likely to turn into a she bear—he fought so savagely."

"Is the search being conducted yet?" asked Steager.

"What's the use? Every inch of ground where he was last seen, for a hundred yards around, has been searched. He disappeared among huge rocks that are in the center of the mountain, and there he can rest, as far as I am concerned. He killed none of my particular friends, and I like a brave fellow," saying which he withdrew his head and was soon engaged in a conversation with his fellow-guards.

Vidal, as soon as he had transacted his military duties of the morning, visited Boussard, while he and Murieta were taking their morning meal in the marquee.

"Be seated, Colonel Vidal. They can not find the peddler?"

"No; so far he has evaded the most diligent search. All the avenues among the rocks have been thoroughly examined by the men, and no sign can be found—except the print of a woman's foot."

"The print of a woman's foot?" said Murieta, and she cast a look of inquiry at Vidal.

"What can this mean?" said Boussard. "Can this uncouth peddler of pins and needles be in league with the spirits that are said to live among the rocks of this mountain, as the fawns of old lived in their silvan abodes?"

"The prophetess!" said Murieta.

"Yes, the prophetess; she roams these mountains," said Boussard.

His voice had hardly ceased sounding, before Marta stood before them, escorted by two guards. Surprised, Boussard rose to his feet.

"As we were guarding the rocks, this morning, where the peddler disappeared, we saw something white fluttering in

the wind, advanced on it and found this woman. How she got there is as much a mystery to us as how the peddler got out," said one of the guards.

"Release her. Withdraw the guard from around the rocks and return to the camp. The peddler has escaped," said Boussard. Turning to Marta—"Will the prophetess be seated?"

"No; she must back to the rocks of the mountain. The prisoner you sought is far away from the mountain. He is favored among the gods of the crags and caverns. To-morrow night at midnight, meet the prophetess at the old stone cross at the eastern base of the mountain. She would unfold more that destiny has in store for the White Tiger of the Tropics, the woman of Arabia, and Hernando Vidal;" saying which she left the tent and took her way through the encampment.

"Now, Arnaud Boussard," said Murieta, "she will reveal to you the chamber of the immortals, where the destinies of men are read from the book of prophecies."

"We will be there when the Mission-bell rings the hour of midnight," said Boussard, and ambition was again weaving her fairy web in his fertile mind.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DEATH-LEAP.

IN the camp of the Tigers, where yesterday was all bustle and excitement, now peace and quietude reigned supreme.

Inside the marquee were Boussard, Murieta and Vidal. Murieta had laid aside her harp and reclined gracefully upon the cushions in voluptuous ease. They all had been talking concerning the captive spy. It was resolved to give him one more chance for life.

"We will postpone his execution until to-morrow morning at sunrise, unless he renounces his Liberal faith. Let us to his tent," said Boussard, at length.

"How does the spy?" asked the Tiger, as he stood before the chained prisoner.

"Thirsty," was the sullen response.

"Do not the guards furnish you with water from the spring?"

"Once in twelve hours."

"Guards!" said Boussard, "go to the marquee for a bottle of my finest wine and a goblet."

Steager's weary eyes brightened.

"Drink that, and let it warm up your soul."

He needed no second bidding, but drank it with avidity.

"Good—excellent."

"Drink and be merry, for to-morrow you—may die."

"May die?" said Steager, as he drained the second goblet.

"Steager thought he *must* die."

"You have a chance to save your life. One chance only: renounce the Liberal cause and link your fate with that of Arnaud Boussard."

"Steager can never do it; he can die as becomes a Liberal soldier. He will never live a soldier of the empire."

"Steager, to-morrow morning, at sunrise, you die. Guards, be vigilant. If, by *any* accident, he escapes this time, the guards on duty will be hurled from the mountain-top;" saying which he and Vidal left the tent.

As Vidal left Steager's tent, Humfredo signaled him, and entering his own tent, a conference followed.

"Humfredo, the time set for the execution of Steager is to-morrow morning, at sunrise."

"By one o'clock he will be walking across the prairies toward Vega motte, in company with Humfredo."

"He is in chains."

"I know it. He must release himself from his chains while I amuse the guards. See that he gets this file," and Humfredo took from under the folds of his blanket a file of the finest finish.

"He shall have it," said Vidal.

The shades of evening were gathering around when the relief guard came on, and received their instructions from both Boussard, and Vidal. The file was dropped at the prisoner's side, and Steager immediately covered it with his body.

A blazing fire sparkled and leaped up in front of the prison-tent, and three guards sat before it on camp-stools, each holding in his hands his gun. They were all Mexicans, and amid song and story, and the smoke of fragrant tobacco, they whiled the early hours of the night away. Humfredo passed at intervals before them, so as to attract their attention.

"Come hither, Humfredo!" and a musical laugh, as only the Mexican can laugh, followed the call.

"Could Humfredo favor three thirsty men with a bottle of *ardiente*?"

"You would get tipsy; then what would Humfredo do?"

"Trust us, Humfredo."

He disappeared, and soon returned with two small bottles.

"One for you," said the youth, "and one for the relief guard. Can I trust you with it?"

"The relief shall have its own, be sure of that," promised the men.

The bottle went around; the song grew louder and merrier, and Humfredo was toasted as a true Mexican and good fellow.

This was the propitious moment for Steager. He plied the delicate file so well that ere the relief came around he had the four iron rings that confined his arms and legs so nearly severed that a twist of his stout hands would open them, and his limbs would be free.

The relief guard came at length, and before assuming their duties they looked in upon the prisoner.

"All right," said one.

"And this is all right," said another, as he displayed the small bottle left by the other guard, as promised.

Replenishing the fire, they drank from the bottle. They talked glibly, but in low tones. Then they drank again, and a sense of balmy ease crept over them; and when again they drank, and hurled the empty bottle down the cliff, there came a sound of far-off music. It was the Mission-bell; and they dreamt of cascades, beautiful sunsets and showers of rose-leaves; then they slept.

A lithe form glided across to the prisoner's tent and went in. Quickly the muffled chains were taken from the soldier's

limbs. Then two forms came forth. They clambered down to the ledge and soon were gone.

Steager reached the Liberal encampment when all but the guards were wrapped in slumber, and startled Gonzales and Tristan as much as if a specter from the mountain had paid them a visit. No more sleep that night for the two, and, gathered around the cheerful blaze of a fire, they discussed the events that were to take place the next morning. Humfredo had confided his mother's orders and arrangements to the spy, as the two parted on the plain that night.

The sound of the bugle awoke the three guards from their slumber in the morning. The men, aroused, soon were astir, yawning and stretching their limbs.

"The *ardiente* had a strange effect upon us. How it caused my face to tingle, and a drowsy sensation to creep over my whole body! That is the stuff that is drank in the grand marquee. We fight for the empire, but we drink, no pure wines; the wine we drink flows from the mountain rocks."

"Hush! the relief is coming."

With quick steps the relief came to the prison tent, and the officer of the guard looked in.

"Carajo! The prisoner is gone!" was his fierce cry. "Ho! there! give the alarm! Arrest these men."

Soon the whole camp was aroused and under arms.

Boussard hearing the bustle, sprung to his feet, and made his appearance upon the scene, saber in hand.

"Why this alarm?" he demanded.

"Colonel, the prisoner has again escaped. His chains were filed off."

Boussard's face grew livid, and he convulsively grasped the hilt of his sword.

"Where are the guards?"

"They are bound."

Boussard advanced to the three trembling men.

"You slept upon your posts, or—"

"We slept, colonel, and ask for mercy."

"Mercy?" he shouted, and his eyes were tremulous with rage. "Does man have mercy upon a snake?" and with a quick thrust he drove his saber through the body of the Mexican, who fell dead at his feet. Again he was prepared

to thrust, but the saber's point was dropped to the ground as the life-blood of the guard ran down the polished grooves.

"No; you must be thrown from the mountain."

Vidal interceded, but Boussard, with a wave of his sword, motioned him away. A strong guard formed around the doomed men, who were marched to the steepest portion of the precipice.

"Unbind them," sternly ordered Boussard, and the Mexicans stood before the awful precipice.

"We appeal to you in the name of Mexico for mercy," said one, as he knelt at the Tiger's feet.

"Do not kneel to this human Tiger," said the other. "Mexicans, you see your comrades murdered! *Avenge it!*" and with a savage yell he leaped from the precipice.

Down, down he went, his body gyrating in the air; then, with a sound that could be heard on the mountain-top, he struck the earth and was dashed to pieces.

"Over with this other carrion!" and six stalwart Austrians and Frenchmen struggled with the frantic Mexican.

There was a loud murmur among the native troops, but it died away as the body of their countryman was hurled down the cliff.

"Colonel Vidal," said Boussard, "send fifty men to Paraiso, under Captain Chaves, to keep an out-look for the enemy. Let ten of the command be Austrians and French; the balance Mexicans—they are the best scouts. Instruct them to watch the road leading to the mountain. The enemy is lurking around the vicinity of Paraiso."

Vidal ordered Chaves to the scout, but he saw a gloom upon the Mexican's face, and knew that it boded no good to the Imperial cause.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LAST SHOT.

IN the camp of the Liberals busy preparations were being made for a march. Tents had been struck, blankets rolled and fastened to the saddles, rifles and pistols cleaned, and a supply of rations, sufficient to last them four days, cooked, had been served.

"Captain Tristan, during our campaign in the mountain horses will be useless. I have been troubled to know how to make a safe disposition of them while we cage the Tiger and his cubs."

"Paraiso motte would be a safe place in which to conceal the animals. Plenty of grass and water there; and they will be completely hid from view. We could safely leave a guard of twenty men with them. That number could hold the place against fifty."

"Toddles would be the man to command them," returned Gonzales, as he looked in every direction for the personage spoken of.

"There he is," said Tristan, "in a statuesque pose"

In the center of the encampment was J. Henry Toddles. He stood with his back leaning lightly against a tree, arms folded, and the weight of his body resting upon one foot, while the other was carelessly thrown behind its mate. He did stand in pose, as good actors stand when they have naught to say or do—like a statue; and by his side was his friend and fellow-traveler—his horse, as quiet as if cast in bronze.

"A picture, Tristan."

"Something is passing through his fertile brain. Toddles!" said Gonzales in a louder tone of voice, and Toddles turned his head without moving his body, a characteristic trait among old frontiersmen.

Gonzales motioned Toddles to approach.

"What was passing through your mind, Toddles, as you leaned against the oak?"

"I were thinkin' how it were possible as which them Tigers let as valuable a animal as that one go," and he looked with much concern at his small horse.

"Perhaps they admired your bravery, and sent him after you?"

"No; it were intended as a insult."

This was too much for Gonzales and Tristan, and they laughed heartily at the result of the profound reflections of Toddles.

"Toddles," said Gonzales, "we will *corral* the horses in Paraiso, and you are to command their guard of twenty men."

"When the fi'tin' comes off?"

"Until after the fight or capture."

A look of positive sadness overspread his face, and he sat down upon the ground and folded his hands across his knees, remarking in an undertone:

"J. Henry Toddles, who would have thought that you, a veteran, would come to this—guarding horses in a *corral* when a fight's a-goin' on. Obey orders, Toddles; but they're not your senterment—no, not by a long sight."

"Toddles, I considered it a post of importance, as in case of accident we would look to our horses for safety, and we know you would never desert the post; but I will release you from it. You shall go with the command and have a hand in the fight."

"Colonel, them's my senterment. Toddles are always willin' to fight, but not to guard a *corral*."

He sprung to his feet, all evidences of mortification disappearing, and sauntered back slowly to his horse, which he caressed as if it were endowed with the intelligence of a human.

As Toddles left the group, Steager rode hurriedly through the camp, toward the two officers. On riding up he saluted them, saying:

"Colonel Gonzales, while Steager was at the hacienda Santa Luzia he saw a scouting party of at least fifty of the enemy. They passed by Santa Luzia and bore directly for Paraiso."

"It is a scout in search of you, Steager. Boussard has

sent them out either to recapture you or feel for the enemy."

"Is it safe to leave them on the prairies while we are on the mountain?" asked Tristan.

"No," said Gonzales. "We must mount and be after them. If they are at Paraiso, or in its vicinity, we will capture them."

"If they are in Paraiso, colonel, remember what havoc our men made in the ranks of the Tigers, while we occupied the same stronghold," said Tristan.

"True; but it will not do to let them range on the prairies while we are on the mountain. If they are in Paraiso, we must have them out."

"Marta's guide is to meet us at Paraiso," said Steager; "therefore it is necessary that the enemy, if in Paraiso, should be routed out, otherwise it may destroy our plans."

The bugle sounded to saddle; there was a clanging of steel spurs and sabers, as the brave riflemen sprung into their saddles; then, forming by fours, they marched in a fast walk in the direction of Paraiso.

All the prairies to the left of the mottes were covered with a soft, yellow light, and a hazy veil, like thin, wet smoke, floated along as if enamored of the earth. At the base of the mountain, and slowly extending to hacienda Santa Luzia, rested a deep shadow, and the top of the mountain was edged with saffron and violet tints from the declining sun, as if God had crowned it with celestial light.

The Liberals, as they rode along, turned instinctively and gazed with admiration upon a scene made sublime by nature's choicest colorings. A mountain-top, tipped with the tender rays of the expiring sun! How admirable are the delicate tracings of light, how exquisite the blendings, and how ineffable its effect. It is the expiring glory of the day—the going out of a light that has no equal.

In the midst of this resplendent light were the enemies of the men who rode to Paraiso.

At length Paraiso presented itself to view; the column was halted and field-glasses brought into requisition.

"I see no smoke," said Gonzales.

"There is no smoke at Paraiso," replied Tristan; "but

I fear the enemy is in ambush. What does Steager think?"

Steager looked through the glass about five minutes, and returned it to Tristan, remarking:

"Steager saw no smoke: but he saw men's heads; they are in there. Give him ten men and he will draw them out."

"Select your men, Steager," said Gonzales.

Quickly he selected ten men, the first choice being Toddles.

"Ef they are in that motte, we will hear from them soon, and no mistake; them's Toddles' senterment," said the inimitable Toddles, as he rode from the ranks.

Riding slowly forward, Steager and his ten men took a position behind the brow of the hill that commanded the narrow entrance to the motte. Lying flat upon the earth, they peered through the grass, but were unable to gain sight of any thing.

"Toddles are of the opinion that he can circumwent their horses," and from his throat burst the loud neigh, as if from a horse. No response. Again he repeated it, when a horse's head could be seen, with ears pushed forward, apparently listening to the deceptive sounds. Another neigh from Toddles, and a gentle whinny came back from the motte in response.

"Toddles is willin' to risk his repertation as a first-class peddler as which they are in there," and as he spoke he exposed his body to view.

Suddenly there was a quick, sharp report, and Toddles fell to the earth, and a red stream of blood spurted over his hunting-shirt. Steager sprung to Toddles' side, and lifted his head from the ground.

"Toddles are circumwented," said the wounded man. "This are a accident, Stagger, as will, peradventure, be the last."

A film glassed his eyes as the life-current ebbed away, and the large head of the courageous scout grew heavy on the hands of Steager.

"Water!" said Steager, and a canteen was put to Toddles' lips, that were fast becoming blue. Again he rallied, and his eyes looked earnestly into those of Steager.

"Toddles are circumvented, and that were the last shot. Stagger, take care of that animal. If it were not askin' too much, I would like to be planted in Tishomingy county, j'in-ru' McNairy—but—it were askin' too—"

The head fell back, the body relaxed, and J. Henry Toddles had ended the comedy of his life in a tragedy.

"He is dead!" said Steager. "Brave, generous Toddles, how he will be missed!"

They caught the lifeless form of Toddles in their strong arms and bore him back to where the command awaited them, and laid the body down on the ground before Gonzales and Tristan.

"Dead?" exclaimed Gonzales. "Genial, generous, honest Toddles, dead?"

But all attention was then arrested by a confused volley of small-arms; smoke arose from among the trees, and riderless horses came from the motte, neighing, and joined the troop of Liberal horse, as if seeking their protection.

"What can that mean?" asked Gonzales, hurriedly.

"A fight among themselves, or a *ruse* to draw us toward the motte."

"Santa Maria!" exclaimed Tristan. "A white flag is being waved in front of Paraiso!"

"Go forward, Steager," said Gonzales, "and learn what they want, but beware of treachery."

"They must meet Steager on the little hill where Toddles was killed," muttered Steager, as he rode forward to the swell of ground before Paraiso.

Reaching the hill, Steager raised a white flag in answer to the one in the motte, and presently five Mexicans rode boldly out to meet them. On reaching the hill, the Mexican officer, Captain Chaves, saluted Steager, saying:

"Senor," and he eyed Steager closely, as in him he recognized the escaped prisoner of the mountain, "do you command the force in the distance?"

"No, senor; Colonel Gonzales, of the Liberal army, commands."

"My business is with him. You are at liberty to bring forward his whole command," said Chaves.

A messenger was dispatched after them, and Gonzales and

the force moved forward to where the Imperialists and Stea-ger's Liberals stood.

"Colonel Gonzales, I am Captain Chaves of the Imperial army. From this moment I renounce my allegiance to the service of Maximilian, and offer my sword and forty brave men to the service of Liberal Mexico," and he handed to Gonzales his sword.

"In the name of the Republic, I accept your services, but will not deprive you of your sword."

"The way is open to you. Our guns are stacked, awaiting your orders," said Chaves.

One hundred men were detached from the main body, and rode into Paraiso. The first object that attracted their attention was a body swinging from a tree. But objects of a still more startling character met their eyes. Upon the ground were the bodies of thirteen men, shot and hacked to pieces.

"Who are these men, and how this butchery?" said Gonzales.

"Did you hear the first shot, senor?" inquired Chaves.

"I did. It killed one of my bravest men."

"That man, a Frenchman, fired the shot against orders," said Chaves. "I hung him. These nine men, Austrians and French, fired into the squad that executed the Frenchman, and in retaliation were killed."

He then related the barbarous execution of the three Mexican guards, which cruel act caused him and his men to espouse the Liberal cause.

At this moment Humfredo made his appearance to guide the troops to the base of the mountain, when Chaves smilingly remarked:

"Now I see how the prisoners escaped so mysteriously. Senors Humfredo and Vidal are Liberals. So is Chaves, and so he will remain until Mexico is free."

"Captain Chaves, you and twenty of your men shall accompany us on our expedition. The balance will remain, with twenty-five of my soldiers, in possession of Paraiso, where our horses will remain corraled."

The night proved dark and forbidding, and the wind had veered from the south-west and was blowing from the north.

The horses were carefully staked inside of Paraiso, a few

fires kindled and hot coffee prepared for the command. The fires were then extinguished, and slowly the column filed out of the motte, and, guided by Humfredo, pursued the trail to the north of the stone cross, at the base of the mountain.

To avoid accidents, the guns of the Liberals were devoid of caps, and their sabers were left with their horses at Paraiso.

Before twelve o'clock they reached the base of the mountain; guards were placed carefully around the Liberals, and orders given that those who wished to sleep could do so.

The dead bodies at Paraiso were buried outside the motte, and that of J. Henry Toddles carefully guarded on the inside.

CHAPTER XV.

"THIS IS THY EMPIRE!"

"HUMFREDO," said Vidal, that evening after the execution, as he stood before his tent, "are the Mexicans dissatisfied?"

"They are ripe for revolt. Boussard's work of this morning has goaded them almost to desperation. A bold leader could cause them to fall upon the Austrians and French who uphold Boussard in all his acts of cruelty and bloodshed."

"Little do they know that to-night will forever end it. Humfredo, when this is over, and imperialism destroyed in Mexico, you and your mother shall live in ease and comfort the balance of your days. Hacienda Santa Luzia shall be yours forever. I can never live in it again, as all its surroundings are associated with memories so dreadful that I can hardly realize that they ever transpired."

"Humfredo and his mother are your devoted servants, as they were the devoted servants of Senor, your father," and tears showed themselves in the Mexican boy's eyes.

"And for your devotion to my father and myself, I give to you hacienda Santa Luzia."

Twilight had come and gone, and the night was fast running its course, when a group stood upon the point of the mountain, wrapped in cloaks and Mexican blankets. The

group was composed of Murieta, Boussard and Vidal. No words were spoken; they awaited the coming of Humfredo and the horses.

"He comes!" said Vidal, and Humfredo rode up, leading three horses.

Humfredo dismounted and extended his right hand. The delicate foot of the Arabian woman was placed upon it, and Murieta sprung into the saddle.

"Mount!" said Boussard, and soon the tramp of their horses could be heard in the encampment as they rode toward the stone cross at the base of the mountain.

Reaching the cross, they drew rein and awaited the coming of Marta. Soon the soft tones of the bell came to them distinctly. A figure dark as the night arose near the cross so suddenly that the horse reared and snorted with fear.

"It is I, the prophetess of the mountain. She is here to escort you, all save one, to her home in the mountain. Your eyes must be bound."

"I submit," answered Boussard, evidently acting under instructions of his wife.

Their eyes blindfolded, slowly they took their route toward the mountain. Hardly had they disappeared before ten men rose like specters from the bush and hurried the horses away, and Humfredo sped swiftly to the mountain entrance, and disappeared inside its cavernous depths.

Arnaud Boussard, and Murieta, the Arab woman, stood blindfolded at the entrance to the cave, and in the *mesquite* bushes and cactus around them were five hundred of their bitterest enemies.

Inside the passageway a taper was lighted, and the bandages removed from the eyes of all.

Up the spiral passageway the party went in silence, until they reached the Aztec chapel and the chamber of the Crested Serpent. Its tapers were all lighted, and the gleamings of the chamber were intensified by artificial means.

"Grand!" burst from the throat of Boussard.

"Ay, a supernatural beauty," said Murieta, as she drew close to his side.

"It seems allied to the grave," rejoined Boussard, in a deep voice.

"*To the grave!*" came back the echo, and Boussard and Murieta looked into each other's faces.

"It was but the echo," said Vidal.

"Arnaud Boussard and Hernando Vidal, your arms," said Marta. "No arms in this sacred chamber," and she extended her hand to Vidal.

He handed his sword and pistol. Boussard hesitated, then placed in her hands his weapons.

"I go now to unfold your destinies," and Marta disappeared from view only to appear again on the altar, arrayed in the costume of the evening before.

The music, low and indistinct, commenced resounding through the cavern; then grew louder and louder until it seemed to shake the foundations of the mountain. At length it passed into a mournful strain, sad as the sobbing of winter winds among naked pines.

"A funeral dirge," said Boussard. "Does it conjure up the spirits of the Aztecs, that are said by legend to exist in the mountains of Mexico?"

"It is a funeral dirge," replied Vidal.

Marta stood in silence on the altar, waving a wand about her gray head.

"Arnaud Boussard, the White Tiger of the Tropics, below you lies the chamber wherein you and the Arabian woman may read your destiny, your fate. Descend."

A passage lay open to them, and dazzling steps led down into the chamber.

"Come, Murieta," said Boussard, thoroughly excited, and they descended to the chamber of the Crested Serpent.

Loud pealed the music, and again fell into low, wailing tones, and the passageway closed silently behind Arnaud Boussard and Murieta.

The music continued in its varied moods—low and loud, sad and weird. The side of the rock opened and the head of the serpent protruded far out into the chamber, and it waved its arched neck in gentle undulations.

"Oh, God!" said Murieta, and she trembled in every limb.

"Away with such awful sights, thou base conjurer!" yelled Boussard. "Colonel Vidal, seize upon her!"

“Ha, ha, ha!” and a laugh, full of bitterness and mockery, answered him. “It is thy crown, and *this* is thy empire,” and Vidal gazed from the terrace, where he stood, upon Bous-sard and Murieta.

“Colonel Vidal, are you a traitor?” said Boussard. “Come, Murieta, let us away from here.”

They advanced to where they had descended the steps. A wall presented itself.

“Murieta, betrayed! duped!” and he resembled a fierce beast at bay.

Marta looked down upon the bold man and the crouching woman, and in thrilling tones said:

“Arnaud Boussard, and Murieta, you have read your destiny. Your fate is DEATH!”

“I will tear you to pieces!” shouted Boussard.

“Senor Arnaud Boussard, behold in me, your late second in command, Paula Vallejo, daughter of your victim, Jose Vallejo, and in the prophetess of the mountain, Marta, the high priestess of the Aztecs. We took a vow, when you and that human tigress murdered my father—murdered him with smiles upon your base lips—that we would not rest until we had brought you to a terrible retribution. The hour has come.”

The music again pealed forth in a tender symphony—soft, almost delicate in its expression—and from the fissure in the rock descended the huge serpent.

“See, see, Arnaud! The serpent will envelop us.”

He turned, with a look of fierce passion in his eyes and face and glanced at the snake.

“Be it snake, or be it devil, I will combat it!” and he threw himself between it and the crouching woman like a Roman gladiator before his antagonist.

The serpent had gained the floor and was twisting its huge form in spiral shapes. Suddenly the music changed to a wild clang, until the whole cavern shook, and with a swift spring the serpent fastened upon its victim, and folded in its deadly embrace, the struggling form of Arnaud Boussard and they writhed and struggled with demoniac fury. Slowly the serpent unwound itself from the mass of crushed flesh and bones and glided back into the rocks. By the side of the

hideous pile lay Murieta, dead. Terror had robbed her of life, and she and the White Tiger of the Tropics were in the everlasting keeping of the invisible enemy—Death.

At daybreak the Liberals upon the mountain-top attacked the Imperialists. They were without a leader, and after an insignificant struggle laid down their arms as prisoners of war.

Toddles was buried by the Comargo rifles with the honors of war, and to-day his remains sleep in Paraiso, and a rude cross marks his last resting-place.

Shortly after the events recorded above, the Imperial cause suffered defeat, and Maximilian and a number of his prominent Generals were shot, and among that number Ramon Mendez.

To-day Marta and Humfredo reside in hacienda Santa Luzia, and can count their cattle and horses by thousands.

Steager, the brave and gallant Steager, wooed and won Senorita Paula Vallejo, and near the City of Mexico they reared a building of architectural elegance and superior mechanical finish, where, surrounded by fig, palm, and orange-groves, they are living in ease and plenty.

Tristan and Gonzales, for their distinguished services during the struggle, hold high positions in the regular army, and will live and die in the service of republican Mexico.

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